

JUNE 6, 2021

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”*



Sermon: Stand Up for Jesus, Ephesians 6:10-17, 1 Peter 5:8-9

Our hymn this week is Stand Up For Jesus. This hymn has a diverse and somewhat grisly past, though it remains a powerful hymn of the church.

In 1858 in Philadelphia, there was a large revival that had spread throughout the city. Dudley Tynge was a young Episcopalian, mid to late twenties, who had taken over the pastoral duties of the church his father pastored when he retired. He was known to be a powerful, direct, doctrine heavy preacher with a strong anti-slavery position. As it turns out, this combination of traits was not well received by the more “fashionable” members of the congregation. As a result, Dudley resigned and began his own church.

In addition to pastoring his newly formed congregation, Tynge also arranged to preach noonday services at a local YMCA. On March 30, 5000 men gathered to one of these services. Of the 5000, 1000 gave their hearts to the Lord. As a result, this was considered one of the greatest sermons of that time. During the message Dudley said something to the effect of “I would rather lose my right arm at the trunk than fail to preach the message God has given me to preach.”

In a strange turn of fate, that next week he was visiting some folks in the country and watching a corn thrashing machine at work. Somehow his sleeve got caught in the gears and his arm dragged into the machine. The arm was mangled horribly and an artery severed. Sadly in fairly short order due to the loss of blood and an infection that had set in, he passed away. On his death bed he was visited by a group of pastor friends from the area. Among them was George Duffield, a Presbyterian minister originally from Carlisle, PA. The group asked their friend for a parting word. What Tynge offered was “let’s stand up for Jesus.” Duffield was so moved by his friend’s words that the following Sunday he preached his sermon in his memory. Duffield also composed a poem inspired by those words “stand up for Jesus.” The poem was passed along to Duffield’s congregants, who passed it along as well, and it landed in the hands of a Baptist minister. This minister was so moved he published it even wider, and eventually this beloved poem was made into a hymn. And Episcopalian who inspired a Presbyterian who inspired a Baptist.

The hymn has been set to two tunes over the years. One a secular tune, which was not uncommon at the time. After all, if it’s familiar it makes the hymn both easier to sing and remember. The other was composed by a blind man, just an interesting trivia detail.

The hymn itself is a powerful hymn of uncompromised faith, bold proclamation, and unflinching call to spread the gospel. Even the tune sounds like a march. The lyrics referring to us as soldiers. The need that this message is so important that it “must not suffer loss”. Knowing the story of the hymn makes it all the more clear and powerful. The witness of this young preacher, so bold and persuasive that in one day 1000 souls were saved. Think about this in context. This wasn’t some popular televangelist who had rented some large venue for a one or two day crusade. This was just a typical noonday service at, of all places, a YMCA. Tynge’s example is inspiring and the hymn responds very passionately to that inspiration. The message of this hymn is as important now as it ever has been. It is well understood that in the western world, Christianity has been on a steep decline for some time now. In Europe, the Americas, and even now in Southeast Asia, there has been this pattern of a wave of thriving followed by a decline. In fact, it happens that a predictor of where America will be down the road in terms of faith is to simply look at what is happening in Europe.

Following the trend, I learned some things in 2014 when I visited South Korea. In the 1880s, some of the first American missionaries went to Korea. Of the most prominent, several went from Lancaster and Scranton, PA. They turned out to be wildly successful and for some time even through the 1980s and 90s the growth was explosive. When we were there, there were churches as high in membership as 60,000 people. Think about that. There aren’t 60,000 people in Marion plus the nearest next 3 or 4 towns. Yet they were at a place where they were concerned.

The growth had hit a plateau. Things were maintaining, but not necessarily growing. The next step typically after plateau? Decline. They knew the trend in Europe and America, and now fear they may be headed the same direction. The question is “why?” I’m not trying to “doom and gloom”. If we are to reverse the trend we first need to understand it. To understand it, we turn to history.

Once Christianity became the faith of the Roman Empire, it might seem like it enjoyed a time of “thriving.” There were many wonderful things done by and through the church at this time. Unfortunately, there was also corruption and abuse of power. The church in many ways controlled governance and they controlled the people. This level of power is bound to cause problems. They had this control because they also controlled the messaging regarding God and salvation.

Illiteracy was widespread, and even for the literate, they were told not to read the Bible for themselves. The average person was seen as not sophisticated enough to really understand or interpret the Bible. The result is that everyone relied on one source to understand God, the church. When no one is reading for themselves, anything can be offered and believed because there is no check on it. Sadly this led to serious and significant problems regarding how the church conducted itself when compared to the witness of Christ and Biblical calling to faith.

This was the case until a man named Martin Luther said “enough is enough”. He nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church, which were essentially his criticisms of how the church had departed from the genuineness of scripture. Compounding the impact was that there was more literacy AND printing had evolved to publish things more widely. In other words, Luther’s criticisms were able to be shared and understood by more people.

Luther also printed the Bible in the common language, making scripture more personally accessible. People could check to see if Luther’s criticisms were on the mark.

The result was the formation of the Protestant strain of Christianity, a break from the Catholic church, and some horrible ensuing violence and bloodshed. There were many happy to be free to understand scripture for themselves and joined with Luther in the break. There were many who stayed true to the Catholic church and resented the break bitterly. There were also those who, after years of being under the boot of a manipulative and oppressive church, saw no need for church anymore whatsoever.

This last trait is another big part of what was happening at the time. This was considered the “Age of Enlightenment”. People were feeling empowered to think independently and freely. What this meant is that more and more people didn’t feel they needed anyone to tell them what to do or who to be, including the church. When the church gets confused with God, “I don’t need the church” quickly becomes “I don’t need God.” One’s path was up to the individual alone, and not even God needed consultation.

This began the decline of Christianity in Europe. That was 500 years ago.

The Americas saw Christianity land either right before or right after Luther’s break. Meaning they weren’t fully indoctrinated into that European independence. Spain came to Central and South America before Luther and eventually began spreading and influencing up into what is now our Southwest. The Protestants, Puritans and such, largely hit the East coast, and we know their settlements were less than open to independent thought, particularly religiously. If you didn’t like the attitude of the town, find another town.

As the 1700s arrived, there was the first and second Great Awakening. In the mid 1700s the first was focused on shedding the “stodgier” more staid Christianity of Europe and being more about faith as an emotional experience. The second in the late 1700s into the early 1800s was about being a good person. These two attributes would be attractive to the masses for sure. Who doesn’t like a good pumped up emotional experience? When goodness is part of the cultural expectation, who doesn’t want to be associated with the group seen as good? In fact, it’s on the heels of this second awakening that the revival broke out in Philadelphia that spawned our hymn.

Of course the big American turn came with the Revolutionary War. Independence. Independence of thought and person. The “you’re not telling us what to do” to England was representative of a more individual persuasion as well. And the decline in America starts to occur.

There is a double edge to this independence of thought that we have to be aware of. Independent thought is essential to interpreting scripture properly. Every generation ties its own knots in the faith and tradition that don’t line up with scripture. The only way to untie those knots is to have the freedom to ask questions and think for oneself. The trick is being “eyes open” enough to avoid tying our own knots for future generations while we undo the ones from the past.

The dangerous side of independent thought is eisegesis. In other words, not letting the scripture speak to and guide me, but rather coming to scripture with an assumption that I read into it. “I can think for myself and I think I’ve got this figured out. Of course the Bible will support it because I’m right.” This is what makes way for the “roaring lion” of 1 Peter. This scripture is quite familiar to many. Unfortunately, it stops short when quoted. It ends with the “devour.” It’s dramatic, it’s intimidating, it’s easy to use to scare someone about what is spiritually lurking at the door. It’s the boogeyman. If we read just a little further we see that this lion only has teeth that we give it, and also that our experience is shared by Christians all around the world.

“Resist him and he will flee.” It doesn’t say fight tooth and nail. It doesn’t say get in a donnybrook. It simply says “resist.” “The devil made me do it” has never been or will ever be an excuse. We have the ability to choose, to independently think and act. The devil has only the power we give him.

If we stay only focused on the boogeyman, what we miss is that this roaring lion isn’t just the tempting whisper in the ear or in the heart by this unseen lion. It’s all around us. It’s the dangerous of the independent thought that infiltrates faith and compromise it’s witness. It’s what causes the message to “suffer loss”, and in that loss it’s power diminishes to whatever extent this occurs.

Throughout the ages, and even in recent history, scripture and Christianity have been used to justify: murder, large scale slaughter, theft, rape, hatred, racism and most other bigotries, spousal abuse, child abuse, the diminishing and dismissing of those in need, and more. There are pulpits on Sundays that sound more like political platform than spiritual substance. These are all imprints onto scripture. It’s tricky because typically all of it isn’t dumped at once at our feet. It gets baked into faith a little at a time, and all of those echoes compound and compromise the message we offer through word and deed if we allow it to. It’s temptation that is less tempting and more driven into us by the world we live in.

Another lion is the simple realities we endure each and every day. The boss, spouse, neighbor, or child that seems to step on our last raw nerve constantly. The argument before we leave the house we just didn’t need. The bad news that comes at the worst possible time. The guy who cuts us off in traffic. The loss that seems too much to bear. The concern to make ends meet when finances are lean. All of this tempts us to give in to those baser emotions that are reflected in anger, impatience, meanness, and callousness.

The more we see those around us giving in, the more tempting it is for us to grow complacent and give in as well. The more we do this and excuse it, the more our message suffers loss. The more the light of our witness diminishes.

As much as we allow ourselves to imprint our agenda on the Word, that is the degree to which we cease worshipping the God who created us, and replace with a god we created. This is no God at all.

What’s the answer? This all sounds pretty dark. On top of that I’ve made no secret of the regard and respect I have for our congregation. There are many Christians who would say “I hear you, but I don’t really fit into all that mess.” And they may be right. The issue is that there are enough out there who do fall into this mess that Christianity has a big reputation problem

People who don’t ascribe to Christ or come to church do so for a reason. Many times that reason is the number of times they’ve been burned by someone claiming the name of Christ. This means that those who are on point with their faith have a lot of work to do. The responsibility is to get more active and be more present to show the world what a life in Christ looks like. To put something real out there.

For when the church has imprinted all of the mess above into the message of faith, the message of faith looks no different than the message of the world. All of the chaos and crazy are no different in the walls of the church than outside the walls. Folks who are tired of all of the chaos and crazy aren’t looking for more of the same. Especially if the place they go to tries to make the chaos and crazy seem spiritual or even holy. They want something different.

This is what we are called to be, the something different. Yes, the church is made of imperfect people from the world. Yet scripture also calls us to not be content with acting like the world. We are to transform. To look and be different. It is precisely this difference that made the success of the early church, and arguably each movement that succeeded thereafter. The compromise is what has caused the issue.

When we looked at the Firm Foundation of God’s Word, we saw that scripture itself is truly strong and unshakeable. The cracks in the foundation and the instability come when we imprint our own agendas on scripture and in so doing twist and distort it into something it’s not.

So how do we avoid this compromise? The scripture that inspired Duffield gives us a part of the answer. We put on the armor of God.

Much has been made of this passage. Sometimes series are preached highlighting each week on piece of the armor. Today we’re going to look at it more as a whole. The whole of it is saying that each day we need to put our faith front and center in our lives. It’s not an afterthought. It’s a staple.

The truth of God’s Word. Living lives rightly before God. The hope of our salvation. The peace of heart and mind that comes from the gospel. The assurance of our faith that we can withstand whatever comes against us. These are what allow us to go out “strong in the Lord and the power of His might.” This is what helps us to resist that roaring lion and strengthens the foundation of our witness.

The image of armor itself is a bit aggressive. It presumes aggression and violence. It is an instrument of war. There is necessity to see this armor for what it is, as we are to imitate Christ. If we understand the idea of confrontation wrongly we are far more likely to misrepresent rather than represent Jesus. The first question that arises is “who did Jesus confront?” The vast majority of confrontations initiated by Jesus were not geared at the “sinner”. They were geared at the religious

pious poops of His day. They were aimed at the ones who had misused faith in ways that were harmful and missed the entire point of their faith from the get go. If we see this properly, in our own context, we have a much clearer idea of how the idea of confrontation would go. Jesus would embrace, come alongside, break bread with, and show compassion to the nonbeliever who hadn't truly experienced His love and grace. The object of His confrontation would be those who claim His name, yet misrepresent Him in ways that repel from rather than draw people to Him.

Which brings us to this express "stand up for Jesus." What does that get at? So often to "stand up" for someone carries with it elements of aggression and confrontation. We see someone being mistreated and come to their side to tell person doing the mistreating to "stop".

Seeing this way tempts us to misunderstand it. To "stand up" for Jesus in this way would be to look at those who don't believe and may even seem hostile to Christ as enemies. It tempts us to get offended at their attitudes. If we are offended by those seen as enemies, and we "stand up", we end up confronting people in a way that has a much greater chance of driving them away from Jesus and the church.

This isn't the only understanding of "stand up."

If I'm going to be out of town when there is a meeting that will discuss an important issue, I may ask someone I trust to "stand up" or "stand in" for me at the meeting. I want to make sure my thoughts get weighed, and so I have a representative present to speak on my behalf.

To stand up means to represent. Every one of us who carries the label Christian represents Jesus to the world. They look at us, and need to see Him. Those who experienced Jesus when He walked the earth changed the world by following His authentic example.

We also stand up at other times. When someone is baptized, sometimes family or close friends will stand in support of the one being baptized. Sometimes someone will silently stand at the side of the one being baptized in affirmation.

To stand up means to affirm. This we do with the content of our lives. We affirm Jesus by imitating Him in all we do. We affirm Him by striving to be His lights in the world.

Like the inspiration for this hymn, we are courageous, bold, passionate, and unwavering. At the same time, we are gracious, kind, compassionate, merciful, and kind.

I'd like to suggest one more thing that helps us stay on this track. It's a sentiment often applied to our salvation. Our salvation is accomplished by "Jesus plus nothing." The work of redemption has been done already by Jesus and Jesus alone. We simply accept what's already been offered. It isn't Jesus plus my works, nor my faults.

Once we have accepted Jesus, there is the mark that we have been redeemed. This is the transformation that occurs through His grace and the Holy Spirit. This transformation should help people see, when they look at our attitude, spirit and character, Jesus plus nothing. Not Jesus plus my own ambitions and agendas. Not Jesus plus American values. Not Jesus plus whatever I think will impress my friends. Not Jesus plus what I find convenient. Simply Jesus.

Anything that I add into the mix skews it, it cracks the foundation of the Word. This isn't sacrificing our individuality. It is all about the center of who we are in spirit and the nature of how we relate to one another and the world. Part of our strength is how we've been individually gifted or impassioned. How that strength makes a Kingdom difference is when it is done in the authentic, genuine love of Jesus.

That's all it took to shake and change the world 2,000 years ago. Jesus in all His genuineness and authenticity. His example inspired the disciples, who in striving to live into what they experienced firsthand in Him inspired more followers, who formed the church that still exists and ministers in the world today. What more could we hope for in an example?

Know that all that we do in the purest example of Christ matters and makes a difference. The hardship it might bring is worth it. Let's go out to reclaim a message that has lost its teeth not for the message but too often mistaken messengers. Let's go out and Stand Up For Jesus.

(Bible Study groups are taking a break until Fall)