

JUNE 25, 2021

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON: 'Just As I Am' June 6:35-40

This week our hymn is Just As I Am. This hymn has stood the test of time and for many is considered one of the most moving hymns in the hymnal. It was written by Charlotte Elliott and published in 1836. Charlotte was born in England and lived to be 82. In her young adulthood, her health began to rapidly fail. As she struggled with her condition, a Swiss evangelist came to see her. In their conversation she found hope and was persuaded to convert to Christianity. Each year she celebrated that day as her spiritual birthday.

In her life Charlotte composed some 150 hymns. She is widely considered the greatest female hymn writer to ever come out of England. This hymn was written largely as she struggled with her constant infirmity and wrestled with guilt that she could not serve to the extent she wished to. She wrote of herself: "He knows, and He alone, what it is, day after day, hour after hour, to fight against bodily feelings of almost overpowering weakness, languor, and exhaustion, to resolve not to yield to slothfulness, depression, and instability, such as my body causes me to long to indulge, but to rise every morning determined to take for my motto, 'If a man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me.'" She also wrote "God sees, God guides, God guards me. His grace surrounds me, and His voice continually bids me to be happy and holy in His service just where I am."

The hymn Just As I Am was written in the midst of her infirmity and as she did what she could to serve Christ. The hymn itself was actually written with the intention of raising money. Her brother, a clergy person, was working to build a school for the children of poor clergymen in Brighton, England. The proceeds from this hymn would go to provide funding for the project. This single hymn was so well received that it brought in more money than all of the other projects her brother set out to raise funds combined. Her brother even said that after a "long ministry I had hoped to see some of the fruits of my labors, but I feel more has been done by a single hymn of my sister's." This is that hymn.

This past week was interesting in that it gave me a much different connection to this hymn than I've had before. Some of you noted that last Sunday I bolted out of here quickly after worship. My daughter ran in and whispered something in my ear and off I went. A family emergency occurred that could not be put off. We've been in the midst of that emergency all week and will likely be for some time to come.

All of us have these moments or seasons at some point in life. If you're anything like me, when life hits you in the head with a curve ball that flips everything upside down, it can get hard to focus. Our energy isn't the same. Things we'd normally be dialed in on or able to tackle with gusto we can't. The reality is that it doesn't matter what the job is, the feeling is the same. Whether a plumber, a preacher, a teacher, a cashier, a cook, an artist, whatever, we don't feel like we can do justice to what we are asked to do. Even if on the outside things look on the up and up, inside is a storm, it's confusion, it can be chaos.

If you're anything like me, when this happens and you realize you can't do things the way you want to or know you have in the past, guilt can crop up. We feel badly, like we're letting people down.

When we are in this state, this hymn becomes so important, and the backstory behind it incredibly relevant. Charlotte Elliott was distraught that her infirmity prevented her from serving her Lord to the extent she desired. She had guilt at what she couldn't do. Yet she did what she could with what she had. This is all any of us can do. The best we can with what we've got in the moment. Sometimes what we have is fantastic, focused, and firing on all cylinders. Sometimes what we have is a crisis, confusion, and can't find the energy to drive forward as hard as we'd like. God can do wondrous things with our most meager offerings. The key is to offer as we can.

When we come to Jesus in hard times, there is only one way to do it. Just as we are. The reality is that Jesus knows how we are regardless. There isn't any use hiding it. When we do, His arms are open wide. This hymn is a reminder of His boundless grace and love, and that as we are is enough. How else can we arrive anyway? Our scripture in John reminds us that Jesus' command is simple. "Come to me."

Not "come to me perfect", "come to me cleaned up", or "come to me when you're sorted out." Just "come to me." When we meet Jesus as we are, He is there to walk with us, to guide us, to love us, and to transform us. He is there to take what little we have and use it in ways we can scarcely imagine. Never are we turned away. Never are we abandoned.

"Come to me you who are weary and I will give you rest." "Take my burden for my burden is light."

The necessary accompaniment is the "without one plea." Not only do we come as we are, but we also come without excuses. We come without denial, rationalization, or reasoning. We simply come open to what Jesus wants to do with us.

Excuses and the like are only hurtful to us. They are the barriers that we put up to limit what we'll allow Jesus to do in us and through us. We will only receive the blessing so far in these cases. Yet Jesus wants to continue to change us for the better into who He is calling us to be.

This is likened to going to the doctor and lying about the symptoms or cause of an injury. The doctor can only help and heal as much as the doctor knows the truth of what is going on. Hiding only hampers their ability. The same is true here.

That Jesus accepts us unconditionally is beautiful and hopeful. But we're not accepted so we can stay mired where we are. We are accepted so He can pour on us His grace and love to transform and lead us beyond where we are at to something grander.

The more we embrace this truth in ourselves, the greater our ability to reach those who don't know Jesus yet. Just like Jesus takes us just as we are, so He takes them just as they are. Where they are at. He meets them with the same goal He meets us. When we realize that it is Jesus who does the changing, suddenly we are free to do what we are called to. We invite them into His presence.

We do this by bringing His presence to them through the love and light we shine into their world. We do this by inviting them into the disciplines of fellowship, worship, study, prayer, etc. so that they can encounter Him, open to Him, and allow Him to do the work.

We drive folks away when we get in the way and start to tinker in the realm reserved for Jesus. We don't change people, Jesus does. Sometimes He may use us, but ultimately it is in His presence that they meet the One who works miracles of the heart. Just as they are. Just as we are. Without one plea. Simply a desire to embrace the Lord.

On Mother's Day, I told you the fathers would get theirs today. It seems a little odd to tie this hymn to the fathers of the Bible, yet somehow it fits. Not unlike the mothers, there are examples of good fathering and bad, though I would argue that there are more examples of good mothering than fathering.

On the good end we have Noah. His righteousness saved his family from the flood. He had a bit of a hiccup with his son Ham, yet that he alone was worthy to be saved and took his family in tow was certainly a good "dad moment."

We have Joseph. By all reports he was a decent man. We see him care for Mary, protecting Jesus, all good dad things. We don't read much about Joseph outside the nativity stories, but we can I think assume he introduced Jesus to the family trade. At one point, amazed yet doubtful of Jesus, someone utters "isn't this the carpenter's son?"

Of course we have the Father of fathers. God the Father. Unconditionally loving. Longsuffering. Going to the most extreme of lengths to reconcile God's children back to God through the work of the cross. Then we have the bumbles.

Abraham had some bad dad moments I'm sure in the eyes of his sons. Imagine being Ishmael. There's no sense that Abraham told him God had assured he and Hagar would be taken care of. For all he knew his dad kicked them out and left them for dead. Isaac, tied down on an altar with a knife ready to plunge into his heart. The focus of this story is often marveling at Abraham's faith and obedience being ready to sacrifice his son. What about Isaac though? Don't think for a second that wasn't scarring.

Even though Isaac hadn't yet been born, we see character reflected in "life father like son." Abraham passed of Sarah as his sister out of fear when intimidated by a king. This caused issues with the kingdom until he fessed up and she was returned. What did Isaac do with Rebekah? Same thing.

We remember Rebekah made the mistake of playing favorites with Jacob. So did Isaac. His favorite was Esau. In another replay of family issues, Jacob did the same with Joseph. The result? Joseph at the beginning of his story is a bit of a twit and hated by his brothers. Why? Favoritism.

David was a lot of things, we can't forget he was a "man after God's own heart. Also, he wasn't a great father. His son Amnon raped his daughter Tamar. What did David do? Nothing. He just let it slide. The result was his son Absalom murdering Amnon, and then rebelling and kicking David off the throne. The outcome was that in the ensuing battles, Absalom in turn was killed by one of David's great generals Joab.

Hosea, a prophet, cruelly named his children. Essentially he gave them names that meant things like "worthless", or "faithless" and the sort.

Yet what does God do? Like with the mothers, God uses these families, these fathers and their children in spite of their mistakes to carry out God's purposes. Why? Because they came to God. How? They came just as they were. Imperfect, fallible creatures yet willing to trust in God and serve as best they could. In doing so, God used them all to bring about the reconciliation of all creation through Jesus Christ. Whatever they, or we, have to offer, big or small, God can use it for glorious outcomes.

God still uses us today for God's purposes in the world. Coming as we are, without one plea is the step day by day to commune with Jesus in a way that empowers guides and prepares us for our purpose.

No matter what condition you are in today, joyful, celebratory on this Father's Day, or pained, perhaps in some way broken, know that God is with you. Know that you are the loved child of God, and let your heart come before God's throne open and expecting the Spirit of God to meet you wherever you are at.