

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON from Aug 29: Onward Christian Soldiers 2 Timothy 2:3, 1 Corinthians 15: 58, 1 Corinthians 14: 32-33

This is our final message in our series on the story behind our hymns. Our final hymn is Onward Christian Soldiers. It was written by Sabine Baring Gould in the mid 1800s. I was surprised perhaps more than with any of the other hymns we've done at the backstory. Like most people, I am prone to speculate. In the book I've been using, each entry begins with the name of the author and the years between which they lived. Immediately I had a suspicion when I saw that Sabine lived from 1834 to 1924. His life spanned the Civil War era. Given the soldiering language, I wondered that this might be another American hymn akin to The Battle Hymn of the Republic, and written by someone from either the north or south as a sort of rallying song for the troops.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Sabine was born in England and an ordained Anglican priest. He was a prolific writer, authoring books on just about any subject one could imagine. In fact it is suspected that he had more books to his name than anyone else in his generation. This song was written quickly as part of a celebration of the festival Whitmonday. Whitmonday is also known as Pentecost Monday, celebrated the Monday after Pentecost Sunday. It is largely a European Christian occasion, which is why you may not have heard of it before.

On one particular Whitmonday, the children in the school where Sabine was pastoring in Yorkshire were scheduled to march to join up with the children in the school of a neighboring village. He thought it would be nice to have them sing something as they went. Not finding anything he felt suitable, Sabine decided to, as he put it, "hastily" write something himself. Onward Christian Soldiers was the product.

Thirty years later, in hindsight, he would remark that he'd cobbled it together in haste, that he thought some of the rhyming was "faulty", and that nothing surprised him more than how popular the song had become.

Rather than a song bred out of war and battle, it was more Vacation Bible School. Consider the circumstance. Capturing the imagination of children, particularly in that era, who marched? Soldiers marched. What is a common childhood game? Playing war. We even play war as adults. Paintball and laser tag are wonderfully popular games. These are nothing more than playing war with toys upgraded from sticks to actual equipment. Sabine took this reality and crafted a song with language that tapped into this for the children.

VBS today expands on this simple idea that he had way back then. Curriculums are thematically crafted and purchased and can supply everything you need (and often plenty you don't) to run the program. This includes things like videos, dances, and songs that are specifically crafted to the theme of the curriculum.

I've known people who profoundly dislike this hymn because of its warlike imagery. Why on earth would the people of Christ, who are supposed to be radically loving, kind, compassionate, and peaceful, gravitate to the language of violence? I wonder if they knew the story behind the song if they would soften towards it.

In truth, the metaphor of the army and military units has a great deal in common with the church. Certainly not the goal of victory through force if necessary, but there are principles that are necessary and common to both.

Perhaps the most present and powerful necessity is singularity of purpose, or unity in a common goal. When an army goes into battle, what is their main and single purpose? Victory. Yes, there are many other things that happen, and many people have different roles to play. In all of it the goal is to win. This is why there is a culture to follow orders. As the chain of command gets higher, there are people with a broader scope of what all is transpiring. Units are instructed to their various tasks, and orders are followed trusting that perhaps those above see what they cannot in their present limited scope. While it doesn't always guarantee a "win", there is trust and hope that as everyone does their part separately, the end result will be that their missions will ultimately coalesce effectively to produce that common purpose of victory.

Everyone having that same purpose and goal is essential to the best possible outcome. Let's consider it a little differently in a hypothetical.

Let's say all of us are tasked with protecting the citizenry of Marion from some outside force. All of you are joined and united in accomplishing this goal.....except for me and perhaps a few I can convince to join me. I push an alternative agenda. I see an opportunity to line my wallet by extorting money from the citizens. "If you want my protection, you need to pay for it." My agenda is exactly counter to that of the main mission, and undermines its integrity. I am harming those you all are trying to protect, and in the doing sowing distrust of all of us in the process. If part of protecting the people relies on them trusting our unit, now the job has just become much more difficult to accomplish due to my refusal to go along with the goal we've been given.

In Christianity this singularity of purpose is also critical. There is a correct answer to the question "what is the mission of the church?" We know it because Jesus Himself tells us in the Great Commission. "Go into the world and make disciples of all the nations." That's it. That is our main purpose. In fact the United Methodist Church incorporates it into our mission statement. It also adds the hoped for outcome of accomplishing it. "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

While many, even most, Christians might verbally agree to this, it doesn't necessarily play out in practice. If we peel back the layers, we frequently find that people's reasons for being Christian/attending church vary. Some examples in practice would be:

Comfort/Assurance- people like the "warm fuzzy" feeling of being a Christian, and take great heart in knowing that there is something wonderful on the other side of the grave.

"Consumer Christianity"- beyond the common reasons to receive disciplines and opportunities to deepen and grow our faith, the desire

to see what kinds of “goodies” I can get out of the church. It’s a “how can the church serve me mentality.

People like me- I want to be around folks who are just like me. Who believe like me, share my values and views, perhaps even look like me and come from a similar background.

Socializing- the church is full of great people who are fun to be around. I like the gatherings and groups that give me a good, clean social outlet.

Morality Police- being a Christian is like having a badge authorizing me to criticize and even condemn that “bad things” I see going on in the world.

The problem with this is that none of these things are the main thing. In fact, they get in the way of the main thing.

If I’m about comfort, let’s be honest, there are many things about living the gospel and ministering that are uncomfortable. I may not be willing to step into that place.

If I’m mostly all about what the church can do for me, I’m likely not prone to ask the far more significant question of how I can actively serve the mission of the church.

If I only want to be around folks like me, I’m likely, even unintentionally, doing things or giving off a vibe that is unwelcoming to folks who are different.

If I’m mostly about the socializing, that tends to be confined largely to what’s happening within the walls of the church, and the people we’re trying to reach are all outside the walls.

If I’m policing the world of non-believers, it’s far more likely that I’m alienating the very ones I’m called to invite.

Here’s the amazing thing though, If we focus on the goal, making disciples, all of these other things happen anyway!

In ministering we are continually reminded of the message of the cross. The center of the gospel is love and God’s love for us. Both comfort and assurance.

As we serve and reach out to others, we are in community that is present when our own needs arrive. Every opportunity we extend to the world around us is extended to each of us as well. What we avail ourselves of is at our own discretion.

We are naturally around many who are of like mind and very much like ourselves. At the same time we have to wonderful benefit and gift of engaging those who are different. This is most often the space in which we grow as we share different perspectives and understanding the informs one another and specifically our faith.

One of John Wesley’s core spiritual disciplines was fellowshiping with one another. Our fellow Christians are great people to spend time around, and every time we gather there is a social component to the event.

If we are concerned about the morality of the world, this issue self-corrects if we are effective in bringing people into communion with Jesus. We don’t change the heart of another, that is God’s domain. If we want to see the world transform, the people in it must transform first. There is no greater way to foster this than including and inviting people into the presence of God.

The genuine and primary mission, when fully embraced, by its nature satisfies all of these other longings.

Also fitting as a metaphor is the notion of structure. Scripture reminds us that God is a God of order, not chaos.

There is a chain of command in the military. Different soldiers and units have different roles. As the chain rises, the scope of what is seen increases. The system of “following orders” depends on trusting this chain to accomplish their roles, and that those commanding all the moving parts have a clearer idea of what needs done to march on to victory. The hope is that if all the moving parts accomplish their task, the coalescing result will be victory.

Consider the community of faith. Many gifts, one Spirit. Many roles, one Lord. All intended to work in concert together to bring people to faith, and grow the faith of those who already believe. In a community of faith, there is by necessity people tasked with roles that oversee larger aspects of our ministry. We trust them to make decisions and delegate in a way that contributes to the overall impact of the church. When in such a role, it becomes important to consider not just one’s own share of the ministry, but also how it works together with everything else.

One of the simplest examples of this is scheduling. The chain is to call the office to make sure the appropriate space is available for an event. When everyone does this, things plan out well. When it doesn’t happen, things become problematic. If two groups show up to the same space at the same time, we end up with conflict, friction, and hurt feelings. Things done in order make for more efficient and effective ministry.

If our mission is to make disciples, and we do it in order, what about this idea of “onward”?

Onward is about forward motion. The world is never moving backwards, and if we want to remain effective, we too have to move forward. If I drive a car, where is my focus most of the time, the windshield or the rearview mirror? The windshield of course. Not looking where I’m headed is disastrous. The same holds true in our common ministry.

In order to do this in the best possible way, multiple personalities are required. There are those that want to run full speed ahead, change dramatically, and tend to ignore the consequences. There are those on the other end who are pulling hard to stay where we are or even move backwards. Then there are all those versions in between.

All are necessary. We need to forward movers and shakers to push us outside our comfort zone and try new things. We need the ones who want to stay still to reign in change that may be happening too fast, and remind us that there are things that are so fundamental to our faith and ministry that they should not change. Somewhere in the middle we find the right combination and hope to find the will of God. To stay still is to stagnate. To run ahead without thought of consequence is reckless. Both are recipes for demise.

Moving forward also requires letting bygones be bygones. Over the last couple years especially, there have been many times people have given and taken offense. There are decisions disagreed with, and certainly mistakes made. Onward means letting go of them. We realize we are all in this together, grab on to a common mission, and forgive. This is central to who we are as people of faith. We are the ones who are able to see one another with grace and mercy. We are the ones who refuse to cling to a grudge. We are

the ones to realize that bitterness is a poison inside us and toxic to the greater whole. To let go of past offenses is to find peace of heart and mind, and to cut loose an anchor that weighs us down and holds us back.

As we listen to the voices discerning among us, and let go of past offense, we arrive at another question often asked. "How do we stay relevant?" This question is often misunderstood. Relevance isn't the full embrace of the world and all that's in it. It is a mix.

There are attitudes and values held by the world that we are called not to embrace, but stand firm against. The most insidious ones aren't necessarily our individual two or three pet causes that we are passionate about. They are the overarching attitudes that encompass every cause and every passion.

Today, we've often noted and lamented, these are the attitudes of aggression, division, refusal to converse, demonizing those who think differently, and a sentiment that my right to be right is elevated above all. These tear at the very fabric of our society. Most people I know notice this, and want a solution. The solution is the spirit that ought to be shown boldly by the community of faith. Compassion for one another, seeking unity, peaceful spirits, the ability to communicate with grace and openness, and humility are staples in who we are called to be in Christ. If we want to find the solutions to all of our individual pet woes and ideals, it begins with being able to see one another with the eyes of Jesus. This is relevant.

There are many churches who are striving towards this very thing. Sadly, there are many as well that have allowed the culture of the world to slip into the spirit of their ministry. Which makes our job harder.

The other side of relevance is paying attention to how the world listens and hears. What is the medium and manner that the people we are trying to reach have gravitated towards to receive any message. When we considered the hymn I Love to Tell the Story, we noted that it's not just telling the story, but also how we tell the story that makes a difference. Are we doing it in a way that is relevant to the times that we are living in?

Relevance is also doing our homework to serve our communities according to its current needs, interests, and trends. If we are still serving the community of 40 years ago, and the community today looks different and has its own unique struggles and such for the present day, we're missing the target. Knowing our neighbors is essential to minister with relevance.

Why all of this? Why the press to continue moving forward, to actively let go of offense, the relevance of our attitude towards the world and how we serve it? All of this because this is how we effectively engage the main mission. To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

One of the most heartening passages in scripture we read in Corinthians today. Nothing we do for the Lord is in vain. Keep in mind, that we must assess that what we are doing is truly for the Lord. When it is, there is always a good outcome. We may not know it or see it. It may be big, or it may be small. Regardless, someone is touched, some heart is moved, some need is met, and in all of this, nothing is in vain.

Recall how much it takes for all of heaven to rejoice. How many people need to come to faith? How many sheep need to be found? Only one. One soul, and all of heaven celebrates.

There's the story of the boy on the beach after a big storm had washed countless starfish onto the shore. One by one he flung them back into the ocean. A man sees this and comments "why are you wasting your time? It's not going to make a difference." The boy responds as he tosses one more back into the water, "it matters to that one."

Everything we do for the Lord matters. It matters to the world, and the people in it. If we want to see the world change, we need to be the ones to change it. We move ever onward seeking to serve God and one another. As we succeed more and more at our mission, the world has no choice but to transform. So we soldier on, going into the world to make disciples of Jesus Christ and make this place a little more heavenly on the way.

# meals

## 5:30-7 second Tuesday every month

September 14th—**Taco Tuesday** . October 12th —**Baked Potato Bar** . November 9th —**Turkey Dinner**



**Mission Sunday!**  
Sept 19, 9:30 and 10:45  
Pastor Christian Aguilar  
from **Fruitbelt Farmworkers Ministry**



**Saturday  
Sept 25**  
Here at the church  
**5:00pm**



COMMUNITY  
**care**  
GROUP

**Game Night**