

Marion weekly update

SEPTEMBER 12, 2021

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON from Sept 5: Patience with the Patients James 2:1-7, Proverbs 22:1-2, 22-23

This week we are taking a break from a series. We finished our series on hymns last Sunday. This week and next, we'll be taking our scriptures from the lectionary. For those who may not know, the lectionary is a 3 year cycle of suggested scriptures to guide the preaching each and every Sunday. This week we have a testimony. Penny asked if she could share her story, and when I looked at the scriptures this week they seemed to pair very well with the overall idea of testimony, and specifically help us understand why many people are uncomfortable sharing their own.

When we unpacked the hymn "I Love to Tell the Story", we were reminded that scripture tells us that one of the most powerful tools we have to inspire others to faith is our testimony, our story. We inspire some to a brand new faith, and we inspire those already in the faith to deepen and appreciate their own all the more. When we are too shy to tell our story, we put that powerful tool back in the tool box and settle for something with less power.

Our scriptures this morning both are in the context of favoritism. Proverbs impart it as a slice of wisdom. James seems to be addressing something more direct. When people would gather, there were apparently some who would fawn over the wealthy and influential to the neglect of those who were poor. This should not be the case. We are all equal before God. Rather than turning from the poor, needy, and broken in favor of the rich and influential, we need to be caring for the poor, needy, and broken.

Proverbs makes it clear that God defends those who are downtrodden and in need. This means that if by word, action, attitude, or neglect I am harming such folks, God then defends them from me. That is a fight I do not want to pick. It is the ultimate "no win" situation.

James goes on demonstrating that our faith is made known by the works that we do. His "go to" works are largely helping and showing mercy to those in need. It is here we find his famous verse that tells us "faith without works is dead." He also puts it in a very "Lord's prayer" kind of way.

Just as Jesus drives home the importance of forgiveness after He teaches His disciples by telling them that "if you don't forgive, neither expect your Father in heaven to forgive you", James tells us that if we don't extend mercy, neither should we expect mercy to extend to us.

All of this, the favoritism and unwillingness to extend mercy or help those in need is rooted in the same attitude. Judgement. I judge that someone isn't worthy of my mercy, charity, or attention. We'll see how this sense of judgement impacts the sharing of testimony. First, however, there are some social graces bred into us that also serve to inhibit many in sharing their story. These are not bad things at all. In fact they are markers that people love us enough to help us learn to be polite, conversant, and observant to what makes others uncomfortable.

Don't talk too much about yourself. People find this off-putting. Yes, others want to know about you, but they also want you to know them.

Don't brag. People don't like it and it makes you seem arrogant and prideful.

Don't air your dirty laundry. It makes folks uncomfortable and they likely don't want to know the ugly details.

All of these potentially point to not sharing too much of our story. Our testimony is about our lives and experiences. We can't avoid talking about ourselves when we share it. Our testimony includes victories over our struggles, and the goodness of where we were and how far we've come. That seems a bit like bragging to some. As we share our story, struggles, and victories the lesser parts of our lives, and the blunders and sins we've been through are a necessary part of it. This feels like airing dirty laundry.

Fortunately, even if this is felt, sharing our testimony falls outside of these rules. The reason is the intent and attitude behind the sharing. The point in sharing testimony isn't to elevate ourselves or brag or share ugly details for the purpose of sharing. The purpose of testimony is to elevate God, to share our real experience of faith and how God was worked in our lives, and all for the purpose and benefit of the one or one's hearing it. The goal is to serve another by hopefully inspiring a faith they don't yet possess or deepening a faith already there.

Where judgement gets in the way comes from experiences many of us have had, and is sadly present within Christianity. There is real fear that what we share may be turned against us somehow. There is fear that we may become diminished in another's eyes. There is fear that we'll become the next juicy detail in the gossip mill. Most of us have seen reputations ruined because of a detail dropped here or a story shared there. Many of us have had the unfortunate experience of trusting someone we ought not have trusted with details turned on us.

All of this makes the thought of sharing our story feel risky. Depending on the circumstance it can feel like the cost could be too high. To become vulnerable and pour ourselves out takes courage and trust.

We are fortunate here in Marion, and perhaps a bit insulated. Many in our church have been here their entire lives, or for a good portion of their lives. We are fortunate to have a congregation what is welcoming, that looks out for one another, and that has a gracious, loving heart. This is a privilege, but not all churches share this.

Just in Chambersburg, someone had an experience in a church that bears this out. They had a detail of their life divulged. One Sunday a lady came walking up to this individual with a big, bright smile. She leaned in and gave a hug. As she was hugging, she whispered in this person's ear "you may be able to come here, but we never have to accept you."

That attitude is in churches all around the country. That attitude is indeed fostered in churches. What makes it more insidious is how it is laid out. People who can quote scripture, and have the respect of many couch it in a smile and with theological terms and jargon that makes judgement sound holy. It is not.

Because of this reality, it is doubly important that we continue to love one another, to spread that spirit in the community around us, and invite people in to experience it for themselves. This spirit is what we are combatting in the faith. It explains why the church today is struggling. We can be part of the solution. Some of that may involve that bold choice to be vulnerable, so our story has the potential to inspire and show a different, more Christlike reality of what faith and church are all about.

One of the greatest gifts we can give one another is that open, kind spirit. We offer that we can be trusted with whatever information someone shares, and not only keep confidence but offer a compassionate, merciful heart that only wants to help. We are safe to partner with during a dark time or a struggle. Let's face it, burdens are easier to carry when the load is shared and there are those around us helping in grace and care.

We must remember that anyone sharing their brokenness, struggle, temptation and so forth, simply by virtue of the sharing, is acknowledging that something isn't quite right. The sharing is a request for help. Most of us when we are sharing such things have already experienced some form of guilt, shame, or conviction. Heaping more of that on top with a judging spirit only serves to beat someone further down. Our job is to lift one another up.

Judgement is wasted energy. It is counter to what we want to achieve. It drives away rather than calling towards, and may destroy an opportunity to help a life transform.

When we get right down to it, there is an equalizer for all of us that should keep us from a judging heart. All of us are sinners. Each and every one. Not to be a downer, every one of us will die a sinner. There's no avoiding it. Sin is simply missing the perfect mark that God has set, and all of us to the end of our lives will have some piece that isn't right on target. This isn't painting things negatively, just honestly.

Put another way, in keeping with the image of the church as a hospital for sinners, each of us has the same sickness. Sin. The only thing that's different is the symptoms. Fortunately, we know the right medicine. That medicine is the Word of God, the gospel of Jesus. It gives us the example to strive for and live into. The goal is that even though the sickness is chronic, a little at a time we get rid of more and more of the symptoms.

Not only do we know the medicine, we also know the cure. The cure is the grace of Christ imparted to us. When we move from this world to the next, that grace heals us fully, cures the sickness and we enter God's Kingdom whole and in a place where sin no longer exists. The possibility of it is gone forever.

In the meantime, we have to be patient with ourselves. All of us are on this journey doing the best we can. Just like we all make mistakes, so we all too have the same grace covering those mistakes, and the same Spirit changing us a day at a time. In this light, we also grow in patience with one another. Striving to see one another with the gracious eyes of Christ, we listen, uplift, and help one another in our common goal to become more like Jesus.

This is the essence of community. To commune means to intentionally come into a more intimate connection with another, and is often linked to spirituality. We pray so that we can commune with God. We share time and space with one another so that we can commune together deepening our relationships and our relationship with God. This is the glue that holds us together, and the solution to so much of what is ailing the world.

Perhaps one of the most amazing realities is that despite the fact that we all are sinners, God continues to use us to bring the world closer to Godself. If it is true that one of our most powerful tools to inspire faith in others is our story, outside of Godself, God's greatest tools to transform the world is us. Even in our imperfection God sees us in all of our potential, and gives each of us the grand calling to participate in continuing the redeeming work that Jesus began long ago. Be patient. Be kind. Be brave. Tell your story and change the world a little at a time.