

# Marion weekly update

MARCH 20, 2022

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON March 13- Disciplines: Fellowship 1 Samuel 20, Matthew 9:9-13

This morning we continue our Lenten series on Spiritual Disciplines. Last week we considered the discipline of Holy Communion. This week we take a look at the discipline of fellowship.

Fellowship doesn't seem to many people like a discipline. It's looser and sometimes even chaotic. The nature of discipline seems much more focused and intentional. Bible study, prayer, communion and so forth are all very specific. They have a honed in on purpose that is clear. Fellowship isn't so much that. In fact it's almost intentionally unfocused, which is actually where it's power lies. Fellowship is simply sharing time and space with one another.

But it's not unintentional. It's very much intentional, but in a different way than other disciplines.

The intent is in carving out time to make it happen. We must intentionally set time aside for Christian fellowship. Note the specificity here. Christian fellowship. Don't be mistaken, we need to fellowship with unbelievers as well. In our gospel passage Jesus is embodying that spirit well. If we only fellowship with other believers, the message never makes it to those that need it. It stays contained and the world drifts further from Christ. That said, in our personal journey of faith, spending time with other believer is absolutely necessary for our growth and the authenticity of our faith intersecting with our lives in ways that change us and direct our life's journey.

More and more we have to take the time and focus to set this time aside. More than ever before we have excess on excess of opportunities to occupy our time. If we get so wrapped up in the smorgasbord of possibilities, it's easy to forget to carve that time out with our brothers and sisters in Christ. That we live in a society that is more tentative than ever also interferes. People today have less sense of commitment and more of an "unless something better comes along" attitude. Most "commitments" are really just "maybes" because there's always that sense that if a more attractive possibility comes along bailing is an option on the table.

To put gathering with other believers as a non-negotiable takes discipline and intention. We often forget that saying "yes" is actually saying a whole lot more "nos" To say "yes" to worship on Sunday morning, or volleyball on Thursday night, or a dinner or lunch or breakfast is to say "no" to literally any other opportunity that may come up for that time slot. This could mean ten, twenty, maybe a hundred "no"s to every "yes". Holding to that takes intentionality.

The example for us to engage in fellowship is set by Jesus Himself. In our gospel passage, there He is fellowshiping with His disciples AND the "sinners". The ones who the religious hoity toities and muckity mucks deemed unworthy of attention. Yet it is precisely in that fellowship that the opportunity to get to know and be known happens. Fellowship is both. We have to be interested enough in another to want to know them, and vulnerable enough to allow ourselves to be known as well.

The power that exists in this is that so often fellowship is where the bonds of community, family, friendship, etc. are forged and strengthened. Our relationships are created in the space where we have the freedom to share more freely and get to know one another more honestly. In more honed in disciplines, the topic at hand is focused and there is less room for sharing who and what we are. There is less room to share the ins and outs of our lives. Yet these are the places where our faith is lived out, or needs to be inserted the most. If other disciplines give us a personal sense of faith and deeper relationship with God, fellowship is where we hear God speak through one another to a more practical application of that faith.

In fact given the gospel scripture, we see something very critical in our understanding of how the power of God works through fellowship. Who were the most powerful witnesses and movers in forming an early church that understood and proclaimed the gospel? They were the disciples.

Not to be disrespectful, but think about Jesus' ministry. Jesus is God. Even being God, Jesus wasn't able to persuade many, maybe most, people to believe in Him. If Jesus had issues, how much more will we have? That said, His model is significant.

His model was relationship. Relationship forged in fellowship. We only have a small dose of what His ministry entailed. Much of it was spent travelling from place to place. What happened in those travels? Sometimes from chapter to chapter and even verse to verse in scripture, days, weeks, even years elapse. In those moments there is valuable time spent together. In that time, that fellowship, the bonds of connection are formed. The strongest relationships happen to be the ones that formed the early church, which endured to bring us where we are today.

Fellowship matters.

That fellowship occurs in so many places and ways is significant. There aren't boundaries. When I was working in the group home setting, we did counseling sessions with the kids on our caseload. Part of our training encouraged us to not only do those sessions in the sterile, stuffy, formal atmosphere of an office. Sometimes we did it over a pool table or shooting basketball. Often those were the best sessions.

Fellowshipping over a common activity opened things up. There was just enough distraction to drop the guard and be real. Something about relaxing together helps us be more open, more vulnerable, more honest. The honesty is what sticks. It's what gives the other a sense of who we really are. When it's in Christian community, it gives the honest moment of our lives where Christ can be spoken into it. Once again, while God does the work, we can't miss that God primarily uses our relationships as instruments to accomplish that work. We are in constant partnership with God like it or not. God is using us to speak to another, or using another to speak to us.

To go a step further, we have the relationship between David and Jonathan. This is arguably the greatest friendship in scripture. How does such a strong bond form between two people? Fellowship. Their connection is instructive for us.

Jonathan was the son of Saul, the king. Saul was bent on killing David. As this plot unfolded, and Jonathan saw the writing on the wall, he had to make a choice about whom to side with. We see that to side against the king was dangerous. Simply being suspect of siding with David, Jonathan was nearly killed by his own father. Yet he saw what was correct. He and David made a plan to make sure David was kept safe despite Saul's rage.

The question at hand is whether Jonathan would do the same for any average person. Would he risk his neck for a stranger? Probably not. He was willing to step out because he and David were close in the bonds of fellowship.

This shouldn't be confused with a longstanding social media sensibility. "No matter what I'm doing a true friend will stick with me and even participate in it." No, this isn't what this is pointing to. In this instance Jonathan was being a true friend in being protective.

That's wonderful and we all need folks willing to go to bat for us. That said, true Christian fellowship isn't about supporting bad and unfaithful choices out of relationship. Quite the opposite. It's also about stepping up to confront bad ideas and behaviors.

Christian fellowship is about protection AND correction.

When we are in the bonds of genuine fellowship with other believers, we hold each other accountable. I, and all of us, need people who will lift me up when I'm right and hold me to account when I'm wrong. This is the hallmark of honest Christian community. We must be flexible enough to sit in the company of those who disagree with us, yet also able to share time and space with those whom we agree with fervently at the same time.

Fellowship is the space where we forge relationships strong enough to be vulnerable, honest, and gracious. Christian fellowship opens the doors to share our lives with one another, and speak Christ into those lives to make them better.

God speaks to our hearts through the Holy Spirit, and at the same time with incredible frequency uses us and those around us to speak into our lives. When we take the time to fellowship with other believers our lives are better for the Christ that is offered into them. Yes, fellowship draws us closer to one another. At the same time it also draws us powerfully closer to God.

#### BIBLE STUDY - Acts 14

Paul and Barnabas are now in full swing on their missionary journey. They have come to recognize that their field is the Gentiles, not the Jews. This chapter sees them in Iconium, speaking in the synagogue. What? I thought they were going to the Gentiles.

This detail is notable because it reminds us of the very different context they are experiencing from Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, the synagogues are likely almost all Jewish. Here in Gentile territory, we've been introduced to the notion that there are Gentiles who have come to appreciate certain Jewish sensibilities about God and living out life in a way that is generous and compassionate. If you are targeting Gentiles, where better to begin? If they have already left their pagan traditions for the synagogue they are open to new ideas. They also don't have the generations long traditions and entrenchment in the Jewish Law and so forth. They are likely the most "primed" people for the gospel message.

They were wonderfully successful and yet at the same time in other ways not so much. Certainly many converts were made and we understand a church community begun. After all, this is what they were about, building the church. Yet that they weren't entirely successful is actually comforting. It's easy to get discouraged if something we try doesn't work out the way we'd planned. Yet with Paul and Barnabas we see something very different. They count their successes, and in their failures they find reason to continue preaching and drawing people to Christ.

Iconium is such an occasion. Yes, they did well. At the same time there were Jews who stirred up things, along with some of the Gentiles, to the point that a murder plot was afoot. When a murder plot against you is afoot, that's a sign that everything wasn't a wild success. And they ran to the next cities. This will be important soon.

What is being established here and through this chapter as well as the ones that have come before is how God flips things on their head. Each and every time that people try to squash the message, and send the messengers packing, all they do is actually cause the message to grow more broadly. This is the way Paul, Barnabas, and these early Christians responded to hardship. Rather than the efforts they needed to take to stay safe being a reason to stop preaching and ministering, those efforts simply spur them on to keep the message going in the next location they find themselves. This is a tenacity, faith, and boldness that we'd do well to dig deep and find today.

Where they head next frames up some more incredible incidents.

We see a scene play out that we've seen before. A lame man is in the presence of the apostles and receives a healing. This story is told by Luke almost identical to the story of Peter and John healing the man outside the Temple courts. Paul looks at the man. He notes something. This man has been listening to him speak and has achieved a level of faith. Paul exercises his apostolic power and heals the man who leaps to his feet, likely changed in both body and soul.

The one difference here between Peter's and Paul's healing is that with Peter the man's faith came after the healing. With Paul's, the faith came before. This is a testament to the persuasiveness of Paul's speech. Even this lame man off to the side hearing the message conveyed in whatever way he could that he'd connected with it.

Yet once again we see Paul wasn't persuasive to everyone. His message was about worshipping a one true God made perfectly manifest in Jesus Christ. Yet what happened? While the lame man was persuaded, there were crowds who missed the message entirely. Rather than grasp the message, they pulled Paul and Barnabas into their pagan ways. They imparted the identities of Zeus and Hermes to them. They thought that their power was evidence that they themselves were gods. Not instruments of God, but God themselves.

Paul and Barnabas evidence the character that made them effective in their role. They refuse to accept the adulation and instead give the glory to God. Humble and faithful, they won't take the praise. Paul gives them a simple version of the gospel and invites them to faith. Then what happens?

A band of Jews from Antioch come and stir up trouble. Quite quickly this crowd wanting to sacrifice to and worship Paul and Barnabas turn on them. We don't know specifically how the crowd was turned. We also don't know precisely why Barnabas was spared but Paul was not. Maybe because Paul was the one running his mouth far more than Barnabas. It could be as simple as that.

What we see here is that there were Jews following Paul about trying to undermine his ministry. Town to town, Paul is hounded, not unlike how he himself hounded the Christians not terribly long before. Paul had made a reputation for himself. Once again, being hounded combined with Paul's tenacity for the gospel served only to make sure the message spread and communities of faith sprung up all around.

The opposition was so severe that Paul is dragged outside the city and stoned. They leave him for dead. Miraculously, Paul isn't dead but gets up and heads back into the city. Here we take a pause.

Much has been made over the years of Paul's heading back into the city. That he'd been stoned within an inch of his life and chose to head back in to preach the gospel is laid out as an example to emulate. We too should be willing to take a beating and offer ourselves up for more over and over again. Yet there is a problem with this thinking.

Scripture doesn't tell us what Paul does when he goes back into the city. He's not hunted because they think he's dead. It's far more likely that he simply went to familiar faces and safe places to heal for a night and hatch a plan. The next day he and Barnabas depart. There is a far more practical and real application to this passage, particularly when held up against what happened at Iconium. Paul and Barnabas turned tail and ran. And this isn't the first time for Paul that he ran away when a murder plot was uncovered. And this is FINE.

You see, Paul didn't have to go back and back to the same source for abuse. No matter where he went given the nature of his ministry, there was no shortage of fresh people willing to give him grief. The example of Paul isn't stupidly running headlong into the same persecution from the same people over and over again. The example of Paul is discerning when it was time to depart because he'd already achieved what he was going to achieve, and steadfastly continuing to preach everywhere he went, using their attempts to squash the message to spread it, despite the understanding that his life would be readily in danger.

What follows as Luke winds down the chapter is a wonderful model of what building church looks like. First, we see Paul and Barnabas retracing their steps. In these communities there weren't necessarily communities of Christian faith. They were new. What often happens if new converts are left to pinball about without direction? Things fizzle. Paul and Barnabas are savvy enough to know that these fledgling communities need nurturing. They go back through and work with them to establish order and leadership. For us this is a reminder that simply inviting someone to church and getting them there isn't sufficient. They need nurturing, grace, and people who have walked the journey before to guide them on their own new path.

Paul and Barnabas also aren't just flying by the seat of their pants. The repeat what was done for them in these communities where they establish elders. Prayer and fasting are part of the discernment. They lay hands and commission them. The same thing that was done for them before they set out, they do for those they leave to lead these congregations. There is a sense of order forming in how to not only win converts to Christ, but also form communities that will keep that mission and message going.

Where do Paul and Barnabas end? Where they began at Antioch. What do they do? They regale the church that commissioned and sent them with what God has done through their ministry. We need to learn from this. The Antioch congregation deserves this gift. They were faithful and discerning enough to encourage and send these two on their missional way. They should hear about how their faith in Paul and Barnabas has born wonderful fruit.

Too often today we are conditioned to believe that talking about what God is doing in our lives and through us is bragging and prideful. So we keep it to ourselves. Biblically we see the opposite. Sharing in the spirit of humility gives glory to God and inspires us to live and behave in faith. We are given hope in seeing how God is using others around us powerfully in ministry. The essence of this is our testimony and witness. These are our most effective tools in both evangelizing and encouraging one another. Why do we cheat ourselves out of them?

To share what God is doing through us is a celebration. Celebration is joy and inspiration. Otherwise we settle into complacency. So share freely. Let others know what God is doing in your life. Trust that it can be done with a humble yet confident spirit. Know that in doing so you may inspire another to a ministry that shakes the world up for Christ.