

Marion weekly update

APRIL 10, 2022

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON April 3- Disciplines: Study, 2 Timothy 2: 14-17, Nehemiah 8: 1-3

This week our spiritual discipline in our series is Bible study. What we've seen so far is that many disciplines that seem to be straight forward and simple aren't quite such. The reason is less that they are genuinely overcomplicated and more that we've so overcomplicated things. We put rules and rails around things, and those man-made rules get in the way of fully and genuinely experiencing what God has in store for us as we strive to approach God faithfully.

Bible study is no different.

The importance of scripture can't be overstated. Timothy tells us to "study to show ourselves approved". We are told to "rightly divide the word of truth." In other words, accurate and correct understanding of scripture is essential to our living and being in a way that is right before God.

Nehemiah tells us something remarkable about the necessity and gravity of God's word. The Israelites had finally been allowed to return to their homeland after being in captivity. They had come to recognize that captivity was a consequence from falling away from God, idolatry, and failing to keep God's word and law. As a result, they were diligent about returning and setting a foundation from which to move forward. In order to follow God's word, one has to know it. Ezra gets up and reads from daybreak to noon with everyone standing and listening. Think about that time frame. We get antsy if the scripture for the day goes past 20 verses. Here they stand and listen for hours. The consequence of not knowing and following the word of God can be severe. The blessings can also be incredible as well.

Understanding God's word is central to really all of the other disciplines as the other disciplines spring out of God's word.

Like with the other disciplines we've looked at, there is no shortage of limitations, guard rails, "yeses" and "nos" that people put out there to guide how we read scripture. Most of these are man-made. Most of them are also aimed at not just guiding how we read scripture, but also what we understand about scripture. They guide people to particular theologies.

When someone wants us to buy their particular slant on Christianity, it's useful to also tell us how to read the holy book they claim their theology comes from. The issue is that there are conclusions, "rules", and beliefs attached to many theologies that require scripture to be read in a particular way. You not only have to buy the belief, you also have to buy how the belief was arrived at.

The reality is that we don't just read scripture, we interpret it. It's more than just knowing what it says. The important part is how to apply it. Jesus displays this masterfully in the Sermon on the Mount. His list of "you've heard it said, but I tell you" statements is a great example of interpreting. He interprets not to reject or defy scripture, but to clarify for them that they aren't grasping the intent of it. They are looking at the surface and breaking it down to a rule of behavior. Rules of behavior can be skirted, loopholed, and rationalized around. Jesus brings the rules all the way into a heart level of understanding. The behaviors reflect our innermost being. Therefore even if the behavior isn't manifesting, if the inner condition is such that sin spurs out of it, we are still out of line before God.

In other words, we can do all the "right" things and still be wrong before God.

What makes the difference is understanding scripture correctly. Understanding scripture not only helps us know what to do, but it guides our hearts to sin less and have an inner spirit that is in keeping with God's Spirit.

So how do we interpret scripture?

With diligence.

There are several practices and attitudes that help us interpret more fully.

It's more than just reading and knowing. Don't get me wrong, simply reading scripture for it's own sake is good. In fact, in seminary when we were taught about interpretation the encouragement was before diving into any other resources, read the passage for ourselves and listen to what God is speaking to us. This is significant and important. It's often how we hear what God is revealing to us in ways we've never read the passage before, speaking into the present context of our lives.

It's also how we get to know scripture. How we let it sink into our memory. But we need to keep front and center that knowing the Bible isn't the same as understanding it. There are many who can quote book, chapter, and verse but don't apply it in the slightest. This can be dangerous. We've been taught that someone who knows the Bible is to be admired and listened to. Memorization is

simply a skill. Understanding what we've memorized and then applying it correctly is another matter entirely. There are traditions that put a high value on how long we read scripture each day and how much we've committed to memory. We do memory verses in Sunday School, and there's nothing wrong with that. But Bible study goes deeper. It's not about how long we read the scripture but how deeply to we revere it so we're inspired to understand it correctly. It's not just what we can remember but how we apply God's word genuinely in our lives.

Community. Fellowship is another spiritual discipline. Fellowship is its own thing, but it also bleeds into study. Interpreting scripture in a vacuum can be dodgy. Sometimes it's hard to know if what we're hearing it say is God or our own agendas and sensibilities. We overcome this by interpreting in community. Other people who are faithful help us to sift through what is us and what is God. We see and understand things differently which is a wonderful gift. If we are open to one another we gain the greatest insight and at the same time are protected from flying off into left field with our own preferences and proclivities. Study with others is absolutely key to grasping what is really being said to us in scripture.

People who are smarter than us. Let me qualify this statement. Just because someone has a huge following, or because they have a degree, or because they think like we do doesn't make them smarter than us and therefore someone we should allow to influence us. I'm talking about people who are genuinely studied in Greek and Hebrew language. People who are schooled in ancient culture, religion, and society. People who genuinely know archaeology. People who understand the writing styles of an ancient world and can differentiate between story, history, poetry, legal writing, and so forth.

Reading scripture written thousands of years ago, translated into our own language, and taking it at face value is destined to miss the point. There are references, customs, and so forth that we can't get because we're so far removed. Getting them not only helps us clarify scripture, it also makes scripture make more sense to us, and even someone who doesn't believe themselves.

The notion of taking the Bible literally at every turn is false. We all acknowledge that the Bible at least contains parable and poetry in addition to history. So anyone who says they take the Bible literally really means they take parts of it literally. Which ones make a lot of difference.

To further the point, we go no further than Genesis 1. "God placed a firmament". Literally this term means God made a physical, solid barrier above a flat earth with the purpose to keep the "waters above from the waters below". Because sky and water looked alike (both blue), they assume water was with them on the ground and above them in the sky. The "windows of heaven" being opened when rain came was their understanding that God sent rain by allowing the waters above to trickle down.

Now, this could be rationalized to say that this is an ancient understanding of the water cycle. Water on land evaporates to become clouds which return the water to earth. But this isn't genuine. This is them believing in a literal, physical barrier separating the earth from a sea above it. And we know this isn't true.

But it doesn't negate the message of Genesis! The message isn't intended to teach the water cycle. It's to let us know that God created all that is. And that is accurate! So often we see past the literal to get the point without realizing it. And when we return to trying to get literal when scripture never intended it we miss the point.

We saw this this past week in Bible study. Looking at Acts 16 we saw the famous story of Paul and Silas in jail and the earthquake that loosened their shackles and flung open the door. The guard assumes the prisoners are gone and goes to kill himself when Paul shouts "don't do it! We're all still here!" We don't know why anyone didn't make a break for it. It doesn't matter. In the end the jailer says "what must I do to be saved?" And of course Paul offers the gospel and he and his household come to faith.

If we just read it on the surface we might say "hm, he asked how to be forgiven after this and he was converted." This is a mistake as it cheats us out of a much larger message that applies to faith and evangelism.

The prison story is sandwiched between the story of Lydia. She is a Gentile who has come to identify to some extent with the Jewish faith. She fears God and her life reflects it, though there is no formal place in town for her to worship. Paul and Silas meet her outside the city, use her understanding of God to speak the gospel to her and she is persuaded to come to faith. She and her household.

They use the context of her understanding of God to lead her to Christ.

The jailer isn't anything other than a full on pagan. He has zero reference point for God and less than zero for Christ. His question has nothing to do with salvation as we understand it. Earthquakes were signs from the gods that someone was in deep trouble. The Jailer likely understood it was him. Likely he thought Zeus had a mad on for him. Whatever Zeus had waiting next was worse than death and better to end his own life. When Paul speaks up and everyone is there the jailer likely thought it was Paul's God that did it. He is afraid. Whatever is coming next from Paul's God would be worse than death. What to do? Ask Paul how he can save his own hide. Paul uses this context to relay the gospel and the jailer, and his household, are saved.

Diving deeper makes a lot more sense of the story when it's thought about in context of the jailer. Diving deeper helps us see the universality of the gospel. It is offered to Jew and Gentile. And to Gentile whether they have any concept of God or not. Paul's example reminds us to offer the gospel in the context of the person being ministered to, not some cookie cutter version we're told to parley.

How and why we study matters. It affects all of who we are, how we see God, how we see one another, and how we embrace our spiritual disciplines. It determines whether we think and act rightly before God. Misunderstanding a message that was so compelling thousands of years ago is likely why the message is suffering in how it gets transmitted today.

Yes, we need to read scripture on its own merits and listen to what the Spirit is speaking to us through it. We also need to interpret in community for insight and also to keep us focused. We also need to listen to voices wiser than our own. Even when they disagree with us. Because sometimes how we understand things is wrong, and correction only happens when we hear a wiser voice tell us why we need correction.

None of this should be fearful. Study that changes us is good study because we become closer to God. Study that reinforces us is good study because our understanding becomes more solid. Not unlike fellowship study together is both protection and correction. What is on point is protected and what is misunderstood is corrected. In both our faith is made stronger.

Honest study is honest faith. As we head into communion, this sense of honesty is key. Communion as a discipline is only as effective as we are honest with God. Where have we fallen short? How earnestly do we accept God's grace? Are we willing to let God propel us beyond our forgiven sin to whatever wonderful awaits us next? Let's be honest. Let's accept. Let's trust that what's on the way is better than what's behind!

BIBLE STUDY – Acts 17

Paul and Silas continue on their missionary travels. Something of note is that it's becoming established that Paul prefers to start in any given city with the synagogue. That they passed through two cities on the way to Thessalonica with no mention of any significant events might suggest that those cities didn't have any form of synagogue. Even with the story of Lydia in chapter 16 we saw that he was looking for a synagogue. While what he found wasn't a formal one, it at least qualified as a place where people wanting to talk about the Jewish scriptures and tradition gathered.

We've noticed that it seems a little odd that Paul was so interested in going to synagogues when his mission was to the Gentiles. What we're finding though is that the synagogue wasn't for Jews alone. Since Gentiles have been mentioned, we keep reading about these "God fearing" Gentiles. Cornelius was the first one of note introduced to us. Apparently there was a number of non-Jews that weren't interested in becoming Jewish per se, but did align with their beliefs enough to start attending services and study.

Paul always going to the synagogue then makes perfect sense. His skill set was very drilled down in understanding the Jewish Law and scripture. As such he could speak and teach with authority. In other words he "spoke their language." Going to the synagogue in these Greek/Gentile heavy areas where some of them might be found at services there made perfect sense. He could honor his calling to the Gentiles and do it in a context where he could speak with some sense of standing and credibility. He did it well enough that he seems often able to at least persuade a few to faith in Christ.

That he seems to regularly be welcomed as a teacher is a testament to his skill and knowledge. It's also likely that his reputation is growing and preceding him. Like Paul, all of us have our strengths and pockets of society that we gravitate to. Paul was a skilled orator and teacher in the Jewish community. Starting at a synagogue plays to his strengths. If we do likewise, going to people we understand and who understand us, the possibility of the message being received increases. Where we already frequent and find ourselves is often our first and biggest mission field.

Once again, we see an all too familiar pattern playing out. Upset people, in this case Jews, try to thwart the spread of the message. They aren't thrilled with his message so they get some hoodlums stirred up to cause problems. They are so irate that when they can't locate Paul and Silas they go to the man who offered them hospitality. Dragging Jason before some local officials they make their legal claim. It is nothing less than treason. These men are uplifting a name other than Caesar as king. They "turned the world upside down."

There is an important detail to consider here. Paul and Silas are merely teaching. People who believe the message are encouraged to live in peace and love. The ones causing all the ruckus are the ones making accusations that a ruckus is being caused. We need to be careful to not feed in when someone is working to create the very circumstance they don't like and will ultimately complain about. There is a gross hypocrisy at work that undermines any credibility. For us to have a strong witness, our actions, attitudes, and beliefs must all be congruent.

Jason is released and Paul and Silas bump on to the next town.

At Berea the scene in Thessalonica plays itself out again but with less severity. Silas and Timothy clearly feel safe to remain there when Paul heads to Athens. The idea that the Jews in Berea were of more "noble" character likely insinuates that they had a more thorough and sophisticated understanding of scripture. This explains why more responded to Paul's teaching positively. Somehow word of Paul's effectiveness got back to Thessalonica. As if to put an exclamation point on Luke's statement about character, they make their way to Berea and once again stir the pot.

Then it's off to Athens for Paul.

This is quite the episode. Paul tries his hand in multiple places. In addition to the synagogue he speaks and debates in a more public secular arena as well. Athens is a major city as well as a cultural center. Public debate by known philosophers and teachers was common. In fact it was enjoyed and celebrated. Luke even takes care to let us know that the people of the city were curious and talkative to a fault.

Two schools of philosophy were debating with Paul and finding his teaching problematic. It's clear they were viewing him as inferior and perhaps even a bit of an idiot. We know the idea that Paul was offering, Jesus as Messiah and King, was distasteful to Greeks and Romans who weren't among the God fearing Gentiles. In Thessalonica they wanted to bring them up on charges of treason. It shouldn't be surprising that these philosophers and maybe even some of the people listening and onlooking would want to bring Paul to some form of authority.

So they bring him before the Areopagus. This is simply a council with some sense of legal authority. It's interesting because here in Athens the response is quite toned down from what we've seen in other areas. There's still issue with his teaching, but not so much the aggression and violence. In fact when Paul arrives there, it's not legal charges he receives but an invitation. They want to hear about this teaching he has.

What follows is Paul's famous use of the idol to the "unknown god." Much has been made, in my opinion rightly so, about this incident. Rather than chiding them for their idolatry he tries to turn it to his advantage. Luke notes when he arrives there that Paul was disgusted by all the idols he saw. Quite an understandable reaction from one who has a fervent Jewish background and the apostle to the Gentiles. Idolatry was disastrous for Israel and idolatry is a constant lure to Gentile believers back to their old ways.

It would be easy to let that disgust come out in his discussions. It would be easy to rail against them for their foolish worship of gods

and objects that are no gods at all. It would be easy to condescend to these folks who have put their faith and trust in something that doesn't exist. He doesn't go there. Instead he has observed a god that he can use as an entry point in conversation. Paul is meeting them where they are at, not trying to drag them to where he is. In doing so his discussion is scripturally accurate yet applied in a way that might be hearable to this council trying to understand him.

This is always a good reminder to those of us who might be trying to persuade someone to consider a relationship with Christ. We get so much farther with respect, understanding, and grace.

It seems Paul wins a handful of believers. Some think his message is foolish, particularly the idea of the resurrection. Some remain curious and want to hear more. To be fair, when you've been reared to believe in the power of multiple gods, to worship them in many ways to feed the ego of the prideful gods to stave off some kind of punishment, and gods aren't subject to the whims and affects of mere mortals, Paul's message would be strange indeed. A single God who is humble enough to walk kindly and mercifully among people with the purpose of teaching them and redeeming them, and who would allow the creation to kill the creator is a far cry from what they knew.

There is one more lesson to take from this group in Athens.

Sometimes people don't really want an answer. They are far more wrapped up in learning about different things. To get an answer means multiple things that might be hard to swallow. It means the search is over. What's been sought has been found (though we know that with God, coming to God simply redirects the search to learning more about God). It also means that if we were seeking with the purpose of guidance, as is the case in religion and philosophy, if we've found what is correct we then to have integrity must adhere to whatever rules and instructions go along with what we've found. That puts limitations on what we can and can't do, who we can and can't be.

Truly seeking is a courageous and sometimes frightening task. If we get what we're looking for it can change our lives and our world. Fortunately for us, and all of those back then who took a chance and believed Paul's message, finding our way to Christ has wonderful consequences. We experience and extend profound grace, mercy, love, and purpose as we embrace our individual and collective callings that change our world more into the image of the Kingdom of God.