

NOVEMBER 6, 2022

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**SERMON** October 30 'Bringing In the Harvest' Romans 10:14-22, Matthew 9:35-38

This week we finish our series on evangelism. We're going to take some time to do some recap, primarily focusing it through Paul who took up the message about midway through the series.

Paul demonstrates for us most of what we've seen. His most effective ministry puts to rest the fear brought up by thinking evangelism is tunneled into just street preaching and striking up cold conversations with strangers. This, in fact, was his least effective method of evangelizing and ministering.

Rather than this, his effectiveness was born out in simply playing to the gifts and strengths that were part of his very nature. His effectiveness wasn't in hit and run moments but in patiently cultivating honest relationships over time where people could not only hear the gospel, but see the fruits of it in Paul's own life and witness.

Fortunately for the spread of the gospel, Paul's own gifts and affinity were in religious circles that would have been primed for the discussion he offered. His success began in synagogues comprised of both Jewish and Gentile worshippers. Places already ripe for religious discussion and reasoning. And this also happened to be Paul's strength. He was masterful at interpreting and arguing the scriptures. As such it was the perfect place for him to begin his ministry in any city he found himself.

He found the place and people with whom he shared a common language and experience. He found the people with whom he knew their language and lingo. People with whom he shared a foundational interest and knowledge base from which to build something more. He went to what he knew, and in forging new relationships there had opportunity to share the gospel and bring people into a new understanding of life and faith through Christ.

Paul didn't have to find a new skill set or go seeking a new place to find people to get to know. He already had the skills and ready made places to meet people and build relationships simply by virtue of who he was. We are no different.

Every one of us is already equipped to evangelize. Our individuality born out of our natural gifts, talents, interests, hobbies, work, social circles and on and on put us in places regularly where we rub elbows with people with whom we have similar interest and speak their language. Every one of us has places we frequent where we see the same folks over and over again.

Not only our similarities, but our differences also give us so much opportunity. "I can't minister to the old because I'm young or the young because I'm old." "I can't minister to the gay because I'm straight or the straight because I'm gay." "I can't minister to the rich because I'm poor or the poor because I'm rich." I can't share the gospel to those I'm not alike with, or can't relate to. Yet this is so untrue. The assumptions we have about one another given our differences are vast and often wrong. To show those different from us, in whatever way, that we defy their assumptions is wildly powerful. Indeed what we need often to see the power in something is to see how it's transformed one we see as ugly different from us into actually in concert with our core values and sensibilities.

So we see that the things that hold many back from "evangelism" don't hold weight. We are who we are and we are uniquely and adequately prepared to share the gospel and invite others to faith. Why is it so hard? Because we miss the most powerful part of our witness.

We wonder if we can share the gospel adequately. If we have the backing to really answer any question that may come up. This is the wrong question. Because leading into the gospel is the "why" of why we share it. It's our own story. Our testimony. How has God born fruit in our lives and why do we feel the need to share our story? Our own story is the one thing that we are wildly expert on. It is the story to which no one else can answer questions. It is the power of God at

work in our lives.

No other story has more backing in our telling it than our own. We share this in relationship. Not forcing it, but allowing it to unfold over time as our relationship with someone else grows. Paul in fact uses his own testimony to bolster not just new congregations but existing ones. He reminds them of his own journey to Christ and what all it's done for him in not just base belief but resolve. He is the poster child of transformation and uses that to encourage others as well as provide credibility to his witness for Jesus.

Romans reminds us that the only way the lost find Christ is through the sharing of those who already believe. It is up to us to offer the story of Jesus and how our lives are affected through Him. Otherwise how will they ever know? How will they have the chance to believe?

Through the centuries the church has been built up. Today so many ask the question of what our legacy will be to future generations. There is one certainty. That legacy will shrink and fade without compassionate, courageous men and women of faith who are willing to dare to find and forge new relationships that connect us to those who don't believe, and take the time and care to share the goodness of God with them. To invite them into our community of faith so that not just the congregation, but the very Kingdom of God grows.

Just as in Jesus' day as Matthew records for us, "the harvest is ready but the workers are few." We are to be those workers. Living our lives out in community with one another, and with those who are waiting for someone to show them what Christ look like lived out in action, and help them find that same faith and hope for themselves.

But there is one more issue at hand. What if we succeed? What if we invite and inspire the people around us to come and see what is happening in the community of faith? What does this whole "church" and "believer" thing look like?

The invitation and inspiration may be good to get the ball rolling, but there is real effort and work that must be done in here, just as there is out there.

The courage it takes for someone to enter a church for the first time or after having been absent from church for a long time is immense. It's a new space, new people, and easy to feel like an outsider. People are often quiet or shy not out of rudeness but simply out of a normal experience in a new place. So we need to have radical welcome and hospitality. Take the time to say hello, get their name and greet them warmly. Take a moment to let them know what is where, and maybe even show them around a bit.

If you are the one who gave the invitation, be certain to come alongside them. You are likely their safe spot in an otherwise potentially awkward situation.

Keep in mind also, that the invitations we talked about to offer the various points of entry we have into the congregation are good to offer again when folks come to be with us. The point is never to simply get people in the door and the backside in the pew and let them fend for themselves. Especially if church is brand new to them.

There is a reason Paul uses the analogy of a child for new Christians. It's not disrespectful, but apt. All of us when we are ushered into something new need people to take us in and show us what's what. I may not know how to act, what's expected, or what the whole notion of building a faith even looks like. So I need people to love me enough to walk me through those first stages and phases of entering a faith filled body of believers.

We are reminded that the Great Commission isn't about converts but disciples. Where do we have places to grow in understanding? Will we offer to attend a Sunday School or Bible study so they don't feel alone and out of place? What are the safe places to help someone plug in to serve? What interests do they have that match the many fellowship opportunities every week and month to build connections?

If we are faithful to the task before us, new faces arrive and emerge, and little by little faith blossoms, familiarity breeds comfort, and suddenly the new begins to feel like a part of the body.

This call to evangelize, to be the workers who bring in the harvest is very real and necessary. The mission field is all around us every day. Do we see it? Do we jump into it? As we do, we see more fully that evangelism isn't a one person job. It takes all of us. All of us to reach out and invite. All of us to welcome. All of us to embrace. All of us to guide and come alongside.

If we take the call seriously and want to see the Kingdom truly grow, the recognition is there that it's not time to just talk about it. It's time to step out and get to it. We have a story to tell to the nations. You and I have a story to tell to our neighbor. And we are blessed and fortunate to have such a wonderful, loving family of faith here to invite them to be a part of and taste the goodness of God.

## BIBLE STUDY Acts 28

Luke wraps up the book of Acts with dramatic telling of the shipwreck leading to Rome, a new take on Paul/Jewish interactions, and a hopeful conclusion to the book.

The people of Malta weren't considered uncouth by any means. Some translations call them "barbarous", which really means not necessarily adhering to Greek culture/custom as they "should". We see some of their sensibilities in their superstitious reaction to Paul being bitten by a viper. On one hand he was saved from the shipwreck, yet still he got hit by the snake. "He's a murderer!" Then nothing happens to him. "He's a god!" Their sense of consequence was very keen and in this case fickle.

The scene reveals more than this, however. They, despite their "barbarism", extended above and beyond hospitality to these shipwrecked travelers. Hospitality was expected, but they gave more than necessary. In other words, even though they were "uncouth" and "barbarous", they still had hearts open to grace and compassion. They could allow a message of radical grace and compassion to potentially penetrate their hearts. They may be open to the gospel.

This is significant. Just because someone or some people aren't all we think they should be, or aren't as refined as we'd like doesn't mean they can receive the gospel. To the contrary, refinement and adhering to our expectations of propriety doesn't necessarily mean they will receive the gospel. It's not a matter of status or uncouth. It's a matter of heart and openness.

In truth, what constitutes a culture primed to receive the gospel? What constitutes a culture that is truly centered on Christ? The answer to both is the same. They are centered on love. A culture without Jesus but centered on love has a foundation from which they can receive His message of radical love. A Christian culture must have at its center the core value of Jesus, which is love. After all, God is love.

Paul reinforces the "god" aspect through a multitude of healings. His reputation obviously has an impact. They are all treated well and provided for as they prepare to leave.

While it's not explicitly stated, here it can be assumed that Paul talked to them about Christ. In some situations the lack of exposition should be taken as literally Paul not saying much due to context and circumstance. Here we have something different. Gentiles who have a heart for grace and compassion see him as a god. Paul's character is such, and proven, that he won't stand for this but will remind them he is but a man and to God be the glory. There is no mention of success or failure of preaching the gospel, but rest assured that the Paul of Acts didn't miss the opportunity.

They leave and Luke again gives us their itinerary of port to port. In irony he records the twin gods Castor and Pollux. These were sons of Zeus and "saviors of the sea". Paul knew the actual savior. He'd just encountered Him before and on Malta. The Lord.

They get to Rome and Paul is met by "brothers and sisters". There was a community of believers there waiting to meet him. Paul hadn't been there prior, so someone else had and established this community. They travelled as far as 60 miles to get there. Several days journey that is. What kind of faith is that? What commitment?

How far are we willing to travel for a worship service or to hear a person of God? 30 minutes? An hour? We are spoiled by proximity, choice, and transportation. Do we have that kind of wherewithal to make that journey in the absence of convenience? In Africa people do it all the time. In this modern time they walk days to worship. It's extraordinary. If we do make a journey, who are we journeying to see? Is it a genuine person of God with a genuine message? Is it someone self-proclaiming their status and "godliness"? Are they humble and striving or do they have a "secret" revelation that only they have and we just "need to believe" them? Would we travel for faith or for hype? These are honest questions in today's age of marketing and self-gratification.

The centurion Julius had somehow managed to whittle Paul's security detail down to one simple guard. Perhaps it was Paul's innocence. Perhaps his good nature. Perhaps his citizenship. Whatever the case, Paul somehow garnered accommodations that were comfortable, and relatively free overall. For a period of two years no less.

Rather than the Jewish leaders calling call to task and accusing him, here we have a kind of role reversal. Paul is now convening the Jewish leaders to chat. They are removed from Jerusalem. It seems the leadership is unaware of Paul's fracas causing there. They haven't received any negative word about him. While this seems unlikely, here there is seemingly little friction between Paul and this group.

As is his custom, Paul begins to try and reason with them. There are at least twelve solid synagogues in Rome, and Paul has audience with the ones at the helm. So he starts by identifying with them as "brothers". Giving his sense about things, they prove themselves clueless and ask for Paul to give some kind of clarifying message about this "sect" of Christians. So he calls together another meeting and uses his impetus of relating the "hope of Israel being the cause for his chains" as a reason.

Atypically, this doesn't meet with some huge riot. Some accept, others don't. As we discussed in the Tuesday evening study, there may be some reasons for this. Culture plays a part in how we receive things. In Jerusalem and Judea they were in the hotbed of Jewish culture. Everything was centered on that. Jerusalem is the Holy City. The priesthood and

Temple are centered there. This is where Jesus met His end, where the Christian movement began, and where the threat to Jewish power and leadership was hit hardest. Naturally with all of this and the high concentration of Jew to Gentile this would be a more volatile area.

Cut to Rome. The center of the Roman empire. Roman order and law would reign most powerfully here. To live there would be to have assimilated that into one's perspective, action, and lifestyle. To stir up trouble unnecessarily could be disastrous, particularly for a minority group. In fact a large segment of Jews, mostly messianic ones, had been exiled from the city. This is why Priscilla and Aquila were ousted and eventually met Paul. Meet controversy measured and without incident.

Paul fires back at those who haven't believed with a quote from Isaiah that is more far reaching now than then perhaps. Paul also makes it clear that he is done with reaching out to the Jewish people. He's not saying no one else will, just that he is done. I see this as a very mature and wise choice. Sometimes we're so fed up that any further attempts will be laced with aggravation to the point of being harmful. Better to leave that work to someone not as triggered or close to the situation. This isn't uncommon. Therapists and professionals with traumatic histories often refuse to work with certain demographics. Not out of anger or bitterness, but out of responsibility. They know that they are too close to the circumstances and their own baggage prevents objective helping.

Who more like this than Paul who had been victimized time and again by the Jewish leadership?

The message, however is beyond just Israel, the Jews. Paul's ministry expands the blindness and deafness of the "nation" to far more Paul's ministry is to Gentile nations. Not only will many in Israel turn away, but also from every other nation. In every generation and nation there will be those who will hear and receive and those who will reject. It's not our part to assume who will do what. It's simply our part to offer the witness of Christ and lead those who are ready to faith. Even if we don't lead someone to faith, it doesn't mean we aren't part of the great chain that might. One plants, one waters, one harvests. We are multiple of these at once, and hope we're never none of these.

Finally, Luke concludes the book. Paul is free to minister boldly and unhindered. He does this for a couple years at least. His rented house. Inviting folks freely. No mention of his trial. No mention of his death. Side note: the deaths of more than one apostle aren't necessarily the work of history but tradition. Though the widest tradition holds that Paul was beheaded. But why not communicate that?

Paul may have been unhindered because he was a citizen in good standing. It may have been his innocence. It was certainly the work of the Holy Spirit. He was bold because of the resolve given him by the Spirit.

He also may have been unhindered because this was early in the reign of Nero. During this time he wasn't terribly concerned with Jewish or Christian issues. Later on, however, things stepped up. Nero became more than willing to persecute and execute Christians. But not yet in Acts.

Just don't miss the way Luke ends the book. It isn't about Paul, or at least Paul's death. Just like it wasn't about Peter's, whose death is never mentioned in Acts. It's about the early church and passing on a legacy of evangelism. The book of Acts isn't about Peter and Paul. It's about establishing the early church and all that went into it.

The end of Acts is a call for all of us to follow Paul. And Peter. And Barnabas. And Silas. And Phillip. And every other early missionary of the early church who believed enough to live their faith despite the consequence. Knowing that the yield if done correctly would continue to push the faith forward.

As has been said often, Acts is the one book of the Bible that isn't finished. What was started by the early Christians continues generation after generation. We are part of that link in the chain. So we pray for resolve. We pray for discernment. We pray for strength. We pray for the opportunity to build relationships and share our faith. We pray for God's Kingdom come!