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Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON "Evil vs. Broken" Luke 4:16-21, Genesis 6:5-6

Today is Mother's Day. The message isn't typical Mother's Day fare. Please understand that this isn't an intended slight. The women in our lives are important and amazing. During our prayer time we lifted up the myriad differences in how the day is received. And many times it's a mixed bag. Last week part of the message lifted up the women in our families and lives. We highlighted the amazing example of Ruth and Naomi, a staple in Mother's Day messages. Keep in mind the content of any message isn't confined to a given Sunday! It actually transfers week to week, year to year, and so on. That's the beauty of God's word. It sticks with us through a lifetime.

For whatever reason, I felt led to preach that message last week, which means this one falls today. We look at evil and brokenness. The relation between the two is far too often misunderstood. Clarifying it helps us in our personal faith, our understanding of ourselves, and our approach to one another.

Evil is of course all through scripture. The term is attributed to the condition of people's hearts, their minds, their actions, and their words. Most frequently it is around actions, though we have to always concede that actions come from the thought and the heart.

In our Genesis passage, we see that the whole world seemed to have gone evil except Noah. The danger of this condition is that when everything goes evil destruction is the only outcome. But to grasp what we're looking at we have to go back a bit further in Genesis to the "fall".

Evil is very much attributed to anything that goes against God's design and desire. In other words sin. Sin is in the mind, heart, word, and deed. Contrary to popular sentiment, there are in fact degrees of evil or sin. Yes, all sin is disobedience. But even the Law of Moses, which Paul says helps us designate sin, differs in degrees of evil and sin. It does so by the consequences assigned to committing the act. Not every offense carries the same weight of punishment.

Think about it like this. If I make a cross remark to my wife that is against God's desire. It is sin, it is evil. A mass murderer is also against God's desire. Sin and evil. No one in their right mind would say those two things are equal.

Nevertheless let's look at the story itself. The mistake of Adam and Eve many point to as a truth that we are "evil to our core". We can't make a decent choice even if we want to. "They had ONE THING! And they blew it." Therefore we must be completely sinful.

But let's look at the situation. I argue that the first note of interest is that the condition of being human at its center is that we have choice. We aren't puppets. So in Adam and Eve, as with all of us, there is the ability to decide what to do and not to do. Choice is at the heart of all sin. The blessing is that we can choose right. The curse that we can choose wrong. All of us choose a combination of the two through our entire lives.

In that we also have a nature of curiosity. We wonder "what if?" What happens if I do this? I know I'm not supposed to but why?

Then we have the next layer, sin nature. It feels good! I really want to! When temptation comes that can override the judgment of our conscience (read Holy Spirit) and we choose wrong.

In the Garden, however, there's more to the story than just one mistake I argue.

First, the notion that they didn't know ANY right from wrong before eating the fruit is a false statement. God had told Adam from the outset not to eat the fruit. Even if they didn't know anything else, they knew THAT. Which means that they did know right from wrong in that moment.

But what about all the moments before that? How many times did they walk past the fruit and NOT eat it? How many times did one say to the other "wow that looks delicious" and the other say "yeah, it does but we're not supposed to so let's grab something else"? Hundreds? Thousands? How many right choices were made before the wrong one?

And why the wrong one? An outside influence. All was well until something pushed the envelope. Bumped them beyond their threshold of resisting.

Of course I'm not excusing wrongdoing. "The devil made me do it" is no excuse at all. We make wrong choices and are responsible for them. Period.

Yet we aren't defined only by our mistakes. Through scripture and our own lives and experiences we do good and bad. Make right and wrong decisions. None of us want to be defined by our worst moments. Why?

Because most of us aren't evil at our core. We want to do right and sometimes mess up.

Take a second and think. On any given day, with the hundreds of choices you have, do you make more right or wrong choices? Trust me, I'm leading us somewhere here.

There are a couple things that got me thinking along these lines.

I listened to a preacher recently who was talking about how we should appreciate the "wrath of God". The context was that we should want to see some people harshly punished. When we use terms like "wrath of God" that's typically code for destroyed.

His example was compelling. What if someone commits a truly horrible, evil act that we find reprehensible? If a judge looked at the criminal and just said "you're forgiven" we'd be outraged. And in that narrow sense he's probably right. We see a horrible act and we want to see the one who did it punished.

There's more in that equation though.

This kind of thinking goes very straight to judging someone as irredeemably evil at their core. And deserving of an according judgment. It is the thinking that judgmental people gravitate towards because it's easier to see things in extremes than in the complicated realities we deal with.

If I see someone as evil and I believe God hates evil I can then hate that person. I can exclude. I can hate. I can destroy. I have an enemy and let's face it, many people want an enemy to stand against.

That's too easy, and not accurate.

There's another question. Why do people do what they do? Yes, there are a select few that might have lived lives or are in situations where truly they desire evil at every turn. I won't deny that. It's why we have jails.

That said, there is another reason that people do evil things. And it's not because at their center they are evil. It is because they are broken.

Brokenness causes so much evil in the world. Abuse, neglect, abandonment, trauma...all unasked for... twist minds and values. They warp responses. They cause acts that even the one doing the act regrets later. What we don't often calculate is how often the person who's done the bad thing hates themselves more than anyone else possibly could.

Then, of course we have illnesses where the body's biology is simply not right. The mind is medically broken. I've seen this so many times where untreated illness means bad acting and when properly treated amazingly that bad acting ends!

Brokenness is a cause of evil that not only can't be ignored, it's likely the main cause of it. Unhealed brokenness is all around us.

Our world literally encourages brokenness. When we look at basic group dynamics that are observable(that means it's part of how groups simply operate across the board) the bottom tier is essential for the top tier to exist.

The bottom tier of people who have to brownnose and suck up to get by. The folks who have to allow themselves to be used in order to "fit in" are literally broken day by day. They lose their dignity and their self ownership in order to not get kicked to the side or left behind.

The scapegoats take the brunt of everyone else's mistakes. They suffer for things they never did(Christ anyone?) and take it just to be part of whatever group they belong to. They are broken day by day just to survive.

Every one of us has a place where that brokenness can push us to do the wrong thing. Pushes us to put evil into the world.

And the world we allow and live in needs brokenness to function. The ones who need to be "better than" need the ones to be "less than".

And let's be clear. Often there is brokenness that makes us feel like we need to be "better than". So whatever that evil is I put out in order to feel better than breaks the one that feels "less than". And then the one who is broken by me may more easily do things that are evil and break someone else.

How much of the evil in the world is the result of brokenness?

What's the point? Let's consider Luke.

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."[f]

What about the great physician? "I have come to HEAL the sick".

Now let's be honest, much of this is spiritual healing. But to what end? The end is so that in healing our

brokenness Jesus heals the results of that brokenness. In healing our spirit, our lives suddenly stop being so evil. Our sin decreases. The harm we do to one another slowly evaporates.

Of course evil needs consequence. That's scriptural and logical. To remind us not to do something again, consequences are useful. To protect the community from someone who demonstrates behavior that is hurtful prisons are needed.

Yet how do we view anyone who does evil, big or small? Do we see them as just evil or do we see their brokenness? Do we want wrath or rehabilitation? Do we want harm for harm or do we want healing? Do we want to see the oppressed oppressed or do we want to heal them so that they can find their genuine calling and giftedness?

How much good is cheated by seeing the broken as evil? How much is missed by looking to see punishment rather than healing?

How many times have you and I benefitted by being seen for the good in us even when we've done wrong? How many of us have been helped by healing over harshness? And how open are our hearts to do the same for others?

I said at the outset that this is helpful on a number of fronts. First, it helps us to see Jesus as the healer. This is very much the spirit of our Luke passage and of the gospels.

It helps us be more gracious with ourselves. Maybe it even helps us own our brokenness so that we can seek healing. How many times do we excuse our bad behavior because of our brokenness? How much better could we be by owning whatever brokenness is within us and finding healing. That healing takes many forms. Sometimes it might be primarily spiritual. Sometimes the focus is therapeutic, others it is medical. In all of it Jesus is at the center guiding it as the healer of body, mind, and spirit.

If He is the author of all things as we claim, then He is the inspiration for all of the good things that heal us. Finally it helps us be more gracious with one another. It doesn't absolve the need for accountability but it DOES require grace to make sure that accountability is correct. If all we do is look to punish how much good do we squash out of the world? If we look to combine consequence with healing how many lives are redeemed and how much goodness is introduced into creation?

Yes, evil exists. Yes, we all are part of introducing it. Look inside and ask how much of our own evil is part of being broken? Like the garden, how much of our evil was pushed by something outside of us that encouraged it? Do we also look for ways to heal that brokenness? If we can find grace for ourselves can we find it for others?

I have learned a lot working with people who have been traumatized. Maybe that's why this message is so dear to me. Because where others wrote them off as evil, I got to see what amazing good can come from healing their brokenness.

Wherever you are broken, you can find healing. It comes through faith in the great physician and listening to the Holy Spirit guiding you towards God's instruments in this world that understand your brokenness. And if it can happen for you, for me, it can happen for most anyone.

This is the greatness and glory of the God we serve. This is why we worship. This is why we invite others into the healing grace of Jesus Christ.

BIBLE STUDY 1 Timothy 5

The bulk of chapter 5 is dedicated to how to treat widows. It first starts out by giving a familial sense of all believers to Timothy. Treat older as older family and younger as younger family.

The long sense about widows is telling and very helpful. First and foremost there are qualifications for which widows qualify for aid. There are some who are well provided for by one or more previous husbands. Others are provided for by family. Some widows are provided for by other women. All of this is wonderful and correct. The widows that are "on the list" are those who are in genuine need.

In other words this is a scriptural affirmation that the church should both provide for those in need as well as assess whether the need is actual. It can't be random and willy nilly. If there were not expectations and every person who showed up were given what they asked for the church wouldn't survive. Or at least it would quickly run out of resources to minister and provide ministry to those in legitimate need. There will always be those taking advantage of a generous hand.

Yet we can't stop helping those in need because of a few problem people gaming the system. So we do our best. We meet needs and try to ensure we're doing so to the ones who need it the most accepting that some scammers will slip through the cracks.

That the church had a "list" is telling. Even all the way back then they saw the need for order and organization. They had some system of vetting the receivers of the aid. Then as now, I'm sure it wasn't perfect. Still,

they were trying to be, as scripture might say, “good stewards” of their resources.

The criteria also tells another tale. There is a sense of duty and responsibility for family that is absolutely tied to faith. Several times caring for family is tied to faithfulness. To not do so is to be “worse than an unbeliever”. In other words even heathens know enough to care for their own family. If we can’t do that we’re even lower because we should have that expectation directly from our faith in Christ.

It also calls caring for family putting “religion into practice”. This is absolutely part of our calling. If we are supposed to care for those we don’t even know in their point of need how much more should we care for family? It is also put out there as a rightful gratitude “repaying their parents and grandparents” for how they cared for them throughout their own lives. Faith, family, and care are inevitably intertwined.

Then much of that looked like providing by taking family into their own homes. Perhaps it may have been just making sure they were fed. Today it looks a multitude of ways. Some take family into their homes. Other honor the need for independence by helping with in home services, just checking in regularly, perhaps grabbing groceries, or any one of a number of things we have available. We have social security, the Agency on Aging, and pensions that transfer in our modern age which they didn’t necessarily have.

At the end of the day a few things are evident. Care for people. Take on the responsibility to care for those we can so they aren’t pulling from resources that care for people who truly have nothing. Do it all as our offering to God and in service to Christ.

The younger widows have confusing instructions. We won’t pretend to try to explain that confusion away. On one hand it sounds like remarrying is a betrayal of sorts. On the other hand it is recommended. Either way, there is a sense that younger widows have an opportunity the older widows may not. They have better prospects to remarry. They can continue or even begin a family if they don’t have one presently. They are able to live into a busy and productive life rather than spend their many “livelier” years idle.

Idleness is a significant issue. The concern is that widows who have too much time on their hands, too much ease, and maybe too much money, will spend it getting into trouble. If there isn’t sufficient drams afoot, the temptation is there to create it. SO...don’t let life be idle. Get involved. Do good. Be busy. In their day and age the most reliable option would be to continue on in the confines of marriage and family.

Today it’s no different. “Idle time is the devil’s playground” is a common expression. We are meant to be productive. As Christians we are meant to be productive not just in work but in GOOD works and serving one another. It doesn’t matter if it’s widows, independently wealthy, or retired all of us are or will be given the opportunity to be idle or be productive in good works that reflect our faith. The instruction to widows is wise. It also extends well beyond widows.

We then get into a short discussion about “elders”. These are leaders in the church. The first expression is that they are to be respected and regarded for their work. Even today this is a good reminder. People in leadership in the church sacrifice a great deal. They sacrifice time, often resources, wisdom, and subject themselves to a great deal of criticism. They are worthy of true regard.

At the same time there is a beautifully balanced sense of both honor and responsibility. First any accusations need confirmation. Anyone putting themselves forward in leadership is subject to all kinds of praise as well as gossip. Before throwing someone in leadership under the bus, take the time to make sure any accusations are more than spiteful or petty rumors. They don’t need any more aggravation.

Yet no one is perfect. Even leaders make mistakes. Sometimes accusations have merit. When they do the instruction is to address them before the congregation. A leader is an example both in what they are recognized for and so also need to be comfortable with accountability. Accountability of leadership is a reminder to the rest of the church that all of us are called to live into Christ with a sense of expectation.

The caution here is that doing such requires a spirit within the church. You can’t publicly hold someone accountable if the church is also a place of grudges, gossip, and retribution. Calling someone out publicly counts on a gracious attitude that will support and help the one accused to do better. It can’t be safely done if there will be backbiting, and an unwillingness to let bygones be bygones and celebrate progress as it occurs.

The “laying on of hands” is connected to this. Most link laying hands to prayer for healing. Earlier in this letter it talks about Timothy’s call with the laying on of hands. Laying hands is also a sign of affirming someone in leadership. The caution is to not throw someone into leadership prematurely. There would and still is the temptation to propel someone forward because they are liked, connected, or influential. None of that makes for a good spiritual leader.

Before laying hands to commission someone, make sure they are ready. Because to not if they make a wreck of things the people affirming them are now complicit “in their sin”. Proving our leadership is important for the good of the person desiring to lead and those whom they are going to lead.

The “wine for the stomach” has caused different reactions. Keep something in mind. This isn’t encouraging

Timothy to get drunk. It is a medicinal use for, yes and alcoholic, wine. And nowhere does it tell people to not drink wine in scripture. It says to not drink too much, to stay sober, and to not give over to drunkenness. Wine was a normal part of their life and diet.

Timothy likely was something of an ascetic. "Only water" is the give away. He may have deprived himself of various indulgences as a spiritual discipline. In this instance depriving him of wine may have contributed to stomach problems. After all, not all the water there would have been the best for drinking...

This is a good place to remember that everything has its place. We take pain medications in the right time, right place, and under the right advisement that dull the sense. That's kind of the point of the medication. It isn't wine. Yet it's still a substance.

For Timothy this is no different. Use it in its place. Don't abuse it.

For many people this is frightening to give license to use different medications and such. "What if they get hooked?" That's legitimate. In the end, the fear isn't an excuse to control. All of us have the ability to make decisions and choose. Often forbidding makes for an increased temptation. In the end we have to let each person make their own decisions. Most times that will work out. Tragically sometimes it won't.

As people of faith we also have to represent scripture honestly. Don't say it says something it doesn't. And yet also be clear and truthful about the cautions and genuine limitations it presents.

The chapter ends with another balanced truth. The bad things done sometimes are obvious, other times they are hidden and come out later. The same works with good deeds. Some things we see outright, other times we don't find out until well after the fact.

What does this mean for us? Work towards the good. Whatever we do, likely at some point people are going to find out. It's far better for people to be surprised for the good that we did under the radar than upset by the bad.