

JUNE 14, 2026

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON "How are your sheets?" Acts 11:1-18

A week or two ago we mentioned something that we are digging deeper into today. We talked about Peter being the apostle who opened the door for Gentiles to become part of the church.

This moment is an incredibly big deal. Something was done then that revealed the full love and openness of God to redeem all people. A wall between people was demolished. In some ways there are traditions, congregations, and pastors in Christianity today that would do well to remember this because walls have been raised up over and over again.

These first Christians were also observant Jews. They had no interest in engaging, much less embracing, Gentiles. And for very real reason.

For centuries upon centuries their identity and being was staying set apart from Gentiles. Their culture, tradition, and scripture all told them the same thing. Gentiles are unclean. They are defiled. They are bad. Their experiences showed them that Gentiles would gladly oppress them. And of course, God Godself told them not to mingle with the Gentile community.

Then Peter has this vision of a sheet being lowered from heaven with all of these unclean animals. A voice tells him to eat. He refuses. He believes in Christ, but he is still an observant Jew. Then the voice tells him that if God says something is clean..it's clean.

As much as this lifted the dietary restrictions they were under, it was meant for something far greater. Peter was being prepared to go to the Gentiles and invited them into a discipleship and redeeming relationship with Jesus.

Obviously feeling that sometimes it's better to ask forgiveness than permission he goes ahead and baptizes a household of Gentiles without checking in with anyone first.

When he return and tells them what he's been up to they are angry. They challenge him. We can understand why. Peter relays his story and persuades them that the Gentiles are welcome in the community of faith.

I don't know that we can overstate the enormity of this given all of the history between Jew and Gentile. The wall between them was high and thick. In a moment Peter levels it to the ground.

This wasn't just some easy concession. Now they would be inviting in people whose culture was very different from their own. Their morality was different. Their values were different. Their allegiances different. Their sense of worshipping God was wrapped up in worshipping many gods.

This explains Paul's letters. They were continually having to figure out how these two very different people would fit together under one common faith and be faithful to God despite incredibly diverse backgrounds and baggage.

The goal however was to invite everyone into Christ's redemptive work and hope. If we believe that the power of the Holy Spirit in the presence of God is what transforms us out of our sin and flaws, then we have no choice but to invite any and everyone together to worship, serve, and journey together as we all try to live more faithfully.

Yet through history the walls have been rebuilt. Churches have put gates up to keep people at some version of distance if they don't measure up to some standard that a church has established.

Denominations can exclude one another. Other faiths get demonized and villainized. And rules are put in place. Sometimes the gate of exclusion is at the front door. If someone falls into an unclean category they are not welcome at all. Others there's no barriers at all. Still others people will be given the privilege to sit in worship. And of course no one is turning away their money in the offering plate. But that's as far as it gets. They aren't allowed to serve. Essentially they can be spectators but no full participants. They are forced into a faith that we would say isn't fulfilling or whole because they won't be allowed to exercise their talents and gifts in servanthood and ministry.

Here's some examples of things that can shut a door to someone in some churches. Dress code. Women, can't wear pants. If they wear a dress it better be long enough. There was a young man who worked at a bakery on Sundays. One morning for his break he tried to go into a church for worship. He didn't have other clothes nor could he get home and back so he went in his flour dusted work clothes. He was met at the door by someone in a suit who turned him away because "you don't walk into God's house looking like that..."

Men's hair can't be too long, women's can't be too short. Tattoos are a no no for some. Piercings can be an issue. Interracial couples are looked down on by some. And of course there are many who would turn away

someone from the LGBTQ community.

Of course there's more. We're about to touch on one in more detail. As we do something will be evident I hope. These gates that get put up, these walls, are typically created by people using a couple often misinterpreted verses, or because something else isn't recognized. Often what the Biblical writers were addressing bears no resemblance to what we are using their words to address today.

A case in point in divorce. There are churches where getting divorced is grounds for being kicked out, or if not kicked out shamed out of the church. Others they'll let you stay but you're limited in what you can actually do in ministry.

Unless adultery is involved people are told that they can not divorce. No matter the issue. The result is that many men and women have been badly injured, died by the hand of someone in the household or their own hand because the situation was so unbearable. Even horrific mental, emotional, and physical abuse wasn't acceptable to end the marriage.

And of course they point to Jesus. The problem is that Jesus was speaking into circumstances that were entirely different from ours today.

In His day He was speaking to Jews who had two options in terms of thinking about divorce. These were rival "schools" one called Hillel the other Shammai. And their views were precisely what Jesus was speaking to. Shammai was strict. You could only divorce for adultery.

Hillel was incredibly lenient and allowed for divorce over even the most trivial matters. The examples used were that a man could divorce simply because he found another woman more attractive. He could divorce because she cooked a bad meal for dinner. That's how fickle it was.

These were the options. So Jesus spoke to those options and made it clear that marriage was no trivial matter and to be taken incredibly seriously.

The circumstances though were entirely different. Only men could divorce their wives. Women didn't have the option. Why? They were property. The owner can disown the property but the property can't do the same to the owner.

She needed a "certificate" because should she have the opportunity to remarry if she couldn't prove her divorce she could be charged with adultery.

Unfortunately often what was more likely is that the woman would be destitute for the rest of her days. She would have to return to her family if that was an option. And the prospects of remarrying were slim because she would most likely be seen as damaged property.

None of this relates to our world today. Women aren't property. We recognize the evils of abuse. Women have the right to file for divorce. And our process itself already factors in fickleness. There is a cooling off waiting period when the filing happens to make sure it's not something done in the heat of anger. Both parties have to sign off for the divorce to go through. There are legalities in play to settle property and the like. It isn't the same.

Why didn't Jesus address the issues of today then? Because they are our issues today. He addressed what was in front of Him in His time with His people. Why didn't He speak to other legitimate reasons? Perhaps no one asked Him.

And His point remains timeless that marriage should not be entered into lightly and we should do our utmost to honor it for our lifetimes.

But I'll tell you this. If I have to choose between advocating for a divorce or seeing my child in a grave there's no choice at all. I will advocate for divorce. And I would suggest that Jesus would as well.

Yet we still have churches and traditions that would rather see someone hospitalized or killed than dare to divorce.

And as I said, the circumstances in Jesus' day are not the circumstances of today.

All of these barriers that exclude are walls that need to come down. We need to be like Peter and stop calling people unclean that God has called clean.

Or at least admit that we're all unclean. Because we all have our struggles, sins, and temptations. Here is where we look to this through a lens of gratitude and hope. What happens when we tear down the walls?

We are more at peace. Any time we see someone as unclean or deserving exclusion we automatically create tension and fear in our hearts. These are people we don't want to interact with and often if they come into our presence, especially a place like our church, the fear of "what's going to happen?" is normal and natural.

Tear down that wall and the tension goes away with it. That tension is our own doing. When we simply drop it the world is just filled with beloved children of God that for our part we can be open to knowing and loving.

Our witness and evangelism grow more powerfully. Think about a buffet. Foods that I can't eat for medical reasons or that I just don't like I overlook. For example I can't eat eggs. So if there are deviled eggs or pickled

eggs I probably wouldn't even see them. They are invisible. Getting back to my table if asked if eggs are on the buffet likely my most honest answer would be "I don't know". To me they are "unclean" and so much so that I don't even consider them.

People are the same way. We can learn to have such a detest for some people that we simply ignore that they exist and stay close to people just like ourselves. Those are entire groups of people that I am pushing away from the witness of Christ in my life because I've put a wall between myself and them.

Take down the wall and suddenly there's no limit to who I can reach out to. My witness blossoms and grows. Where I used to think I'd reached everyone in my orbit, suddenly I realize that's not the case because the people I see in my orbit has just grown!

I think the most incredible realization that comes with erasing the boundaries is having to come face to face with how fortunate and loved I am myself.

And so are you.

All of us are here today and most of us are serving or have served in some aspect of ministry at some point. Because all of us have been given a wonderful gift.

We have agreed together to love one another and encourage us to serve and love God and neighbor together despite being imperfect people. We know we all struggle. Not with the same things, but none of us are perfect. Yet we choose to see the potential and possibility in one another and not see each other for our worst aspects. We seek out the good in one another and let that bind us together and work together to shine the light of Christ in our community.

We have decided to break down the walls between us and instead let grace, compassion, appreciation, and love take its place.

For all of us this is hope. Hope that we can continue to overcome and grow. We can journey together through this world seeking our best, most faithful, Christ centered selves and not have to do it alone.

If I have received this gift, which often I don't feel I deserve, how can I deny it to someone else just because their struggles are different than mine? You allow me to come into the presence of God week in and week out with you despite my flaws. That is bringing me with you to the place of hope before God. Everyone deserves that invitation.

The ones who are often excluded are also often in the greatest need of a hope beyond themselves. We have that hope to offer.

As we invite others into this hope of Christ our hope grows as well. We see what God can do in the lives that are transformed by coming to faith and in the process over and over gain see what God has done and is doing in our own lives.

Describe Sheet

In scripture we are told that if we don't love our neighbor we don't love God. Every wall we break down between one another that opens up more of our love is a wall we break down between us and God whose love we both receive and are called to imitate and offer to everyone around us.