

AUGUST 9, 2026

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Sermon “RnRnR: Repentance” Matthew 3:7-12, Joel 2:12-14

When we talk about revival and the idea of repentance this is what pops into my head. That fire and brimstone, aggressive, guilt messaging pushing folks to come to the altar and pray forgiveness and give themselves over to Jesus Christ. I bet some of you have that same idea lurking somewhere in your mind.

In truth as we saw last week repentance is truly a critical part of revival. Modern Christianity has taken the notion and in many ways confused it, limited it, and turned it into something of a punch line.

The truth is that repentance is simply change. Turning from one way of doing and being to a different way. In our terms, turning from beliefs, acts, and words that are opposed to God towards beliefs, acts, and words that are in step with God. In fact revival isn't revival if this doesn't happen. The proof that revival has taken hold is that the ones who experience it are transformed and in turn transform the community of faith and community around them.

Many times repentance as it's used is limited. It's too specific or it's too vague. The fiery messages trying to get people to turn to God are often vague. They hit on the general wickedness of people, temptations, and evil lurking in the heart that comes out in sinful action. The problem is that it is tapping a general guilt and feeling of unworthiness. Without more specific direction how do folks know what they are turning from? What is this wickedness? How do I change what makes me “unworthy” if I don't know what those things are? It plays on emotion well but the lack of specifics make it hard to act upon.

On the other hand many times the message is dialed into one or two sins the preacher is harping at. That gets too specific because everyone who isn't part of the ones being preached at is off the hook.

So what to do?

Part of the issue is that sin has become equal with morality to many people. Don't get me wrong, morality is important. When we are acting immorally in God's eyes we need to turn away from whatever that is to what is moral before God. To limit it to morality though is a problem because there's so many things that get lost in the shuffle.

Morality for most people today is really boiled down to a list of behaviors or ideas that make a particular person or preacher upset. That's what we have to repent of.

But morality is many times in the eye of the beholder. Even when citing scripture to back it up. Scripture says lots of different things about the same things. Also, when we are reading on the surface without genuine study many times we aren't talking about the same things as the people writing the scriptures. We take our own modern version of what we read in english and impose our modern idea of those terms and ideas. It doesn't always line up.

What this means is that a moral compass isn't as cut and dried as most want it to be or would like us to think. Too often it's more about the person creating that compass than it is about the genuineness of scripture and faith. And too often that compass becomes a weapon and a measure of judgmentalism.

When people have pushed me to come down harder on “sin” what they are really saying is they want me to come down hard on morality. Specifically their morality. And usually within that a handful of specific things they particularly dislike and call sin. Some time ago I made a standard and no one has taken me up on it yet. If you want me to preach hard on sin, accompany that request with the sin you are struggling with the most, and then the sins of your loved ones. Those will be the firsts ones we hit.

No one has come forward. Most of the time that I hear that the behind the scenes statement is “preach on other people's sin, but I don't want to be called on the carpet.”

I am very interested in all of us becoming more like Christ which includes our morality. I am very disinterested in co-signing on someone else's judgmental heart.

Matthew 3 is one of the places where we read our sense of a moral repentance into the baptism of John and Jesus. That wasn't the mainstay of their senses. They were much more akin to the message of the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Hosea and more.

They were calling for a repentance away from pride, from cheating one another, dishonest gain, not caring for the hurting and needy among them, abusing each other, stepping on people for their own advancement with little care about how they were harming others.

This makes sense given the harshness towards the religious folks. It also makes sense of the constant references to the old prophets that they ignored in history and ignored in their day.

It also makes sense as Jesus boils down the positive answer to sin. Love God and love your neighbor. That's it. Do those things and you'll likely be living and being in the light of God. I would imagine He was trusting that we'd keep our idea of love in line with God's love rather than twisting it to make loopholes for all that those instructions were trying to overcome.

Perhaps splitting the difference between being too specific and too vague might look like these questions. Is what I'm doing: selfish or selfless? Greedy or giving? Compassionate or callous? Kind or cruel? Hateful or loving? Prideful or humble?

These questions apply to most every word, thought, and action in our lives. If we're honest these are a good dial on where we need to turn from something out of step with God to what is in line with God.

There's still more though. Our idea of repentance is often very connected to "doing". I have to change directed action. What about repenting of inaction? Of doing nothing.

Think about a car in neutral. The engine is running but it's not going anywhere. We call that "idling". We can be like that in our faith. One of the great dangers about that neutral vehicle if that represents our faith is that it isn't that it doesn't have the potential to move. It's just not in gear, making a decision to act, and so it can be moved but it's in the direction something else decides. If it isn't in gear it just moves where it's pushed.

Another term for this is complacency or apathy. In Revelation there was a church suffering from this. The church in Laodicea. Famously they were told "if you are lukewarm I will spit you out of My mouth. I'd rather you be hot or cold."

Complacency and faith don't go hand in hand. Apathy and faith don't go hand in hand. When I've been complacent I was good at making myself feel good about my own faith and redemption. That said I wasn't doing much to make any kind of difference in the community faith I was part of or the world around me.

In Eastern philosophy there's an idea that "to take no action is an action." If I choose to not act it means that I am also choosing consequences for others. If I'm part of a group I now shift my responsibilities onto everyone else. Either my part doesn't get done or others are worked more and likely out of their comfort zone.

Any group, I don't care what it is, if a critical number within it goes complacent or apathetic, will die out.

The exception is the consumer church that has been created. But that relies on having the resources to equip and pay people to do all the work for everyone else. Even if the group grows, the faith dies because it's like a muscle. If we don't use it it shrivels and dies. Our service to God in our faith and our community is as much that exercise as scripture study, prayer, and worship.

If we find ourselves complacent, that is worthy of repentance. Turning from that complacency to be engaged, active, and enthusiastically participating in our personal faith as well as the service and ministry of our community of faith.

Claiming this term repentance is important if our faith is to grow. In order for it to be effective we have to claim it in a way that produces hope, not fear. In a way that takes it seriously, not making it some passive word we use that has no meaning or associating it with a harsh message that pushes forgiveness in an unforgiving way. Scripture gives us that hope.

Joel is a good place to begin. Like the other prophets he is calling the people to change. They need to turn their hearts back to God. Tearing your clothes was a sign of sorrow and repentance. They did the outward show but not the inner work. This is the work Joel is calling them to do.

Over and over again even in the Old Testament we see God promising a restoration for people who turn back towards all that God calls them to. There is forgiveness, purpose, and mercy waiting for us.

The Prodigal Son is the poster boy for this. Jesus talks about the young man who takes his fortune and squanders it sinfully. He returns home after he's broke and broken expecting a harsh reply from his dad. He gets the opposite. His father is just happy that he finally got it right. He saw the change in his son, welcomed him with love and open arms. Grace was abundant. Celebration followed.

This is how it is for us when we turn away from what is displeasing to God to what is pleasing to God. No fear, only hope.

Depending on what we are turning from it can be a harrowing moment. What do we turn to? What takes the place of what we are giving up? That's the adventure of it. Sometimes we don't know. Sometimes we do.

What we do know is that we are free from a conscience struggling with the bad we know we're doing. We have renewed purpose. Our energy changes. If we allow ourselves to apply whatever newfound time or enthusiasm to the purposes of Christ we see our relationship with God grow. We partner more closely with others that have that same mission and perspective. Satisfaction is found not just in the goodness that comes into our lives. It's also found in the goodness we bring to others.

We become stronger and more powerful instruments for the light of Christ to shine in the world.

The power of repentance is because it's not just about me doing something good for me. It is rooted in God, in faith, and directs us into a greater purpose to bring the Kingdom of God to earth.