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Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

"Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy."



SERMON: "Mores, Morals, and More" Colossians 2:16-19, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Romans 12:17-18, 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

This week we are going to look at three things that are unavoidably tied together. We'll consider faith, and then two other things mores and morals, that are essential in the practice of our faith, yet shouldn't be confused with being a standard of how we view faithfulness in one another.

First, let's consider two of our scriptures for the morning. They may seem at crossed paths with one another. In one, Paul discourages, even outright instructs, Christians to not give credence to essentially human contrived celebrations and holy days. On the other hand, we also read Paul's famous words that he becomes "all things to all people that by all means some might be saved." How do these line up? Becoming "all things" seems like it would actually encourage us to embrace some of these man made celebrations in favor of building bridges for the purpose of sharing the gospel.

There is a little of both in these scriptures. We need to remember that Paul is writing to early gentile Christians. They converted from pagan traditions to embrace Christ. These celebrations Paul is referring to are connected to their old religious traditions. The concern is that if they indulge them in any way they will be persuaded back to their old ways and away from the saving faith in Christ they have found. This makes perfect sense. On the other hand, there are man made expectations that we do well to consider and embrace.

These are what we might consider as mores, or norms. Essentially these are expectations, customs, etc. that exist within a community. That community can be national, state, local, congregational, organizational, corporate and apply to any formal or informal group. They are often unspoken and unwritten kinds of codes that if we are part of the community we are expected to follow. Not doing so puts walls up between us and the rest of the community. Those who don't follow the expectations are seen as outsiders, rebellious, even deviant.

While customs are important, and a kind of glue that holds communities together, these specific ones are not necessarily Biblical in any way. They are not scriptural mandates. They are forged in the history and tradition of the community. As such, adhering to them or not isn't a reflection of our faith, but they are integral in our practice of faith.

Some examples of mores may look like the following:

There is an expectations that we stand for the national anthem. If I'm at a ball game and choose to sit during the singing of the Star Spangled Banner, I shouldn't be surprised to receive some dirty looks.

Perhaps in a workplace there is an unspoken expectation that the low person on the totem pole makes the coffee at the beginning of the shift. A new employee might be getting the cold shoulder for a while for not doing it even if they have no idea it's expected. It's an unspoken rule or code.

In many western countries the middle finger carries a disrespectful association. Yet this isn't so in every country. In some eastern countries you could wave that finger around without consequence, yet showing the bottom of the foot to someone is considered a serious disrespect. If I sit down and cross my leg, the person sitting that can see the sole of my foot might be deeply offended.

In Christianity, we hear the unfortunate stories of someone having their "seat" in the pews. A new person comes to worship and is asked to move because they are in someone's "spot".

This begins to move us to the place where norms or expectations get in the way of ministry and the practice of our faith. When something that is irrelevant to our faith gets confused with a privilege or spiritual necessity, something is wrong.

Some of you may have heard me tell the story of the "holy radiator." A young priest takes over for a retired priest who had served his parish for thirty or forty years. Very quickly he feels tension between himself and the congregation, but can't pin down why. Wanting to minister effectively, he asks one of the congregants to help him understand what's going on. He's told that the congregation is offended because he's doing the communion liturgy wrong. Confused, he asks what he's missing. The congregant shares that during a certain part of the liturgy. The retired priest would go and place his hand on the radiator. The young priest knows this has nothing to do with the liturgy, and calls the retired priest to get some illumination. The retired priest chuckles and says "oh, I tend to shuffle when I walk. I realized I was building up a static charge, and so I'd go touch the radiator to discharge the electricity so I wouldn't shock anyone coming to receive communion."

There was nothing Biblical or spiritual about this "touching", but he'd done it so long that it became a norm, or expectation. What was nothing became confused for the holy and got in the way of the relationship between the priest and the congregation. We need to be careful to know what is Christ and what is our own expectation and baggage.

This is where the practical comes in. I'm not sure how the young priest responded. My hope is that he found a way to bridge the issue.

As disciples of Christ, our mission, our calling is to spread the gospel. Part of that is being incorporated into the communities in which we find ourselves. While we trust that the message is powerful on its own, we do well to remember that someone giving credence to our message is reliant on trusting the messenger. If there are customs or expectations in our communities that don't violate our conscience of faith, learning them and embracing them build bridges between us and the community around us that forges relationships. These relationships are the highways through which we share the gospel.

Which brings us another layer in to morality.

Morals, unlike mores, are directly tied to our faith. They are an active expression of our faith in our behavior. Morality is simply knowing and living into what is behaviorally correct in God's sight. As such, living out our moral compass is absolutely essential to living a life that is pleasing to God.

We often find our morality in the pages of scripture. We have the sermon on the mount, the vices and virtues in the epistles, and the law of the Old Testament. Though I would caution how much the Law weighs in our sense of faith and salvation. It's clear that the Law is all or nothing, and that to put our stock in the Law is to separate ourselves from the covenant of grace.

Our morality is incredibly significant not only in defining how we conduct ourselves, but also in the choices we make.

Let's say I have a friend or acquaintance that believes that tying one on and stirring up fights is an acceptable way to spend the weekend. I get an invite to go out with him. Naturally I don't agree with this morality. So what do I do? Once again, that depends on my moral compass. Maybe I decline not wanting to be put into a potentially bad situation. Or maybe I accept because I weigh that it's preferable to make sure there's some mitigating presence to avoid an altercation or make sure there is a responsible designated driver. Whatever the decision, is my Christian morality that dictates it.

That there is more than one moral option leads us to a reason that while dialing in on our own sense of morality is important, it isn't necessarily a sufficient standard to assess another's faith.

It would be nice if morality were as simple as a black and white choice. Unfortunately, scripture has always been a matter of interpretation. As such, not all Christians agree on what is and is not right in the sight of God.

An example is how to understand "thou shall not kill." It's long befuddled me that this disagreement hasn't been more divisive in our faith. Some see it as an encompassing directive. These are those who conscientiously object to military service, war of any kind, the death penalty, abortion, and might even refuse to act in self-defense because of their distaste for violence. Then we have every permutation that follows. Some believe killing is justified in defense of home and country. Some believe the death penalty is appropriate for certain offenses. Some believe self-defense is perfectly fine. Disagreement on the morality of taking a life.

That there is widespread disagreement amongst faithful Christians about what is and is not moral should give us pause in judging one another's faithfulness on our own personal moral standards. Most of us have a kind of "short list" of morals that we might use along these lines. That it's a short list means that whatever is on that list doesn't encompass the entirety of another's life. Nor does it mean that we ourselves aren't behaving in ways that might be considered immoral by another person of faith.

Paul gives us a sense of morality that is difficult but necessary. In Corinthians he zones in on the idea of the morality of eating meat sacrificed to idols. For him, it's no big deal. Idols are nothing so the sacrifice is nothing. Yet where he was, there were Christians for whom this was a serious moral issue. Paul's sense was that if his indulging what he new to be correct might cause someone else to violate their conscience of faith, he'd rather never indulge it again.

This is a very contradictory attitude to what is in our culture today. Today there is a spirit of "I'll do what I like and if you don't like it it's your problem snowflake." This is entirely different. In Christian morality, it's not only living into our own sense of what is right and wrong. It is also restraining ourselves for the benefit of those around us. Sin isn't merely violating the actual expectations of God. It is also believing something is wrong, whether it is or not, and then going against that conscience. It's not just about honoring our own sensibilities. It's about honoring one another's and doing the best we can to not tempt another to do what they feel is wrong, whether we agree or not.

Morality is a tricky thing. On one hand, it is vital to our practice of faith. On the other, it can be a tempting list of sensibilities that draw us into a "new law" or encourage a judgmental spirit that gets in the way of seeing others as God sees them. Imperfect creations in need of a perfect savior who loves them unconditionally.

This is where our faith enters the mix. Our faith calls us to witness and share the gospel. So we embrace the customs and mores around us for the greater purpose of building relationships that allow us to live and share the gospel. We embrace morality because we seek to please God with our lives. It is also our faith that helps us keep the position and importance of mores and morals in check so we don't get drawn into viewing them disproportionately.

Our faith is that we believe Jesus is who He says He is. It is allowing that belief to transform us from within. It is what humbles us to embrace norms for the sake of the gospel, and strive to live a life morally correct before God. It is also what helps us to see one another with the eyes of Christ, and to have peace of mind, spirit, and heart.

This is that final lynchpin that allows us to follow the passage in Romans. To, as much as it's up to us, live at peace with everyone. While our faith calls us to embrace customs to build bridges to share the gospel, it calls us to a morality that is in keeping with God's will, it also calls us to a humility, compassion, and unconditional love that frees us from the burden of judgement.

To live at peace with others means that we need to have peace in our hearts. This is the spirit of Christ. For all our expectations and standards, we remember that the spirit of Christ is one of openness. It is one of mercy and compassion. It is a spirit that would rather invite someone to grace rather than push them aside in judgement.

Peace of heart only comes when we are free from the judgement and condemnation that rears up in us. Perhaps we can't avoid that this temptation is there, it's an unfortunate part of the human condition. What we can do is take that temptation captive and allow the Spirit of Christ to overcome it. So long as we entertain notions of who is deserving of grace and reserve the right to judge, peace will be elusive. The spirit of judgement by its nature prevents peace of heart because there is a consistent frustration that results from seeing and hanging on to what we see as the worst in one another.

On the other hand, when we see one another through the eyes of Christ, this changes. When this occurs we are able to allow the anger and frustration that may come up with seeing folks violate our own mores and morals to turn to compassion and mercy. We may even experience sorrow at whatever brokenness is inside someone that causes acting outside of God's desires and places them on the outside of community. It is this experience that inspires us to the action of healing that brokenness. Rather than an excuse to entirely exclude, we become aware of how we can reach out and seek to include.

Isn't this the fullness of the Great Commission? To go into the world and make disciples of all nations? Foremost in this mission is to embrace the Spirit of Jesus. We remember that we are all in someone else's eyes, in some part of our life, violating their sense of mores and morals as well. Scripture tells us that "all have fallen short of the glory of God." All of us rely on the grace of God and one another to make it from where we are to where we, and God, want us to be. If we ask for grace, we have no other alternative than to extend it.

If it seems like overcoming ourselves is a supernatural task, scripture agrees. "We love because God first loved us." In drinking in the abundant love of God we are filled to the point of overflowing. Not because of ourselves, but because of God's good grace. We can then let that love pour into the world in a way that balances our sense of right behavior with a grace and overwhelming desire to heal the brokenness of the world. In that healing, we shine the light of Christ. That light is what invites the world to know and embrace Him. As we live this out, we become better disciples. As we live this out, we give witness that we trust will inspire and persuade those who don't yet know Him to become disciples as well.

In 1 Peter 3, we begin with seven verses that are often taken out of context. The opening scripture about wives and husbands has been used to define spousal roles for some time. It pushes validity for subservient women and domineering men, and gives it a divine command behind it. This couldn't be further from what this scripture is trying to communicate. So let's look at why this is a misreading of the verses.

The communities in which these believers were living were pagan. They were being persecuted in some fashion by the communities in which they were living. The culture of these gentile communities placed the man in authority of the household. Wives were expected to follow suit of the husband, in most every way, including their faith and worship. Additionally, it is widely thought that the believing community was more women than men.

Part of the reason we see more instruction given to the women to the men lies not in that women have less sense or worth than men. It's due to the nature of their circumstance. The letter is written to Christians in their circumstance. The women are addressed in the event that they are part of an unbelieving household. The men, who are believers, are addressed with the assumption that culturally the household has fallen into line with their beliefs.

For the women, the expectation is actually far more empowering than submitting. They are encouraged to hold fast to their conviction even in the face of an unbelieving husband and the expectations around them to knuckle under. The command to let their inner self be their beauty rather than their attire and accessories isn't saying they aren't allowed to look nice. Rather it's telling them not to let that be the source of their genuine beauty. The beauty they are to shine in the world comes from their faith and what that brings out in their inner self.

The instruction to be quiet and let their actions speak for themselves isn't some blanket command to silence. It's dialed in on not haranguing their husbands about their faith. To do so is to borrow trouble that isn't necessary. Instead, let the actions of love and as much as is possible subjecting themselves to the cultural expectations of who is in charge in the household be persuasive to soften the heart of the husband in the hope that he will come to faith.

Many years ago I had a woman come to me who was having significant marital issues with her husband. The two were constantly fighting, arguing, harassing one another. Taking a note from this passage, the advice was given to, at least on her end, disengage from the harshness. There was resistance at first, but I reminded her that it takes two to fight and perhaps he may begin to soften himself if she takes hold of her end of the interactions. A month or two later we were talking, and she was amazed at the change in her husband after she made the change in herself.

Finally for the wives, there is the comparison to Sarah and her relationship with Abraham. There is a double sense here. The first is that cultural relationship between husband and wife. As long as it doesn't violate larger principles of faith, this is part of adhering to the "authorities" in this world. The point being not to make undue waves for the larger sake of following God's desire for us to inspire the world to faith. The second is that there is a bit of an unequal comparison. Sarah and Abraham shared the same faith while these believing women were living with men who did not. It has to be noted that this skews things a bit.

We then get to the men who are instructed to respect and be considerate to their wives. The remark about "weaker" is simply a referring to physical strength. Regarding them as such is likely cautioning them against using their strength in abusive or overbearing ways. Rather than a slam against women as some read it, it actually elevates them by holding husbands to account to treat them well. The passage finishes with a statement that actually puts the husband and wife on equal ground. Both are equal heirs of both the gift of life and the promise of life everlasting through their common faith.

In the first instance, we see women empowered to stand strong in their conviction against the expectations of both culture and husband, and advised how to do so in a way that will ease their persecution and have the best chance of winning their family to Christ. In the second, the instruction to the husbands is one of mutuality in their relationship, and ends with a statement that suggests equal standing before God. It echoes Paul's "there is neither male nor female" and the reality that some of Jesus' closest disciples were women.

What has been taken as a means to suppress women in truth is the exact opposite. It lifts women up.

Peter then goes on to give another sense of how they should treat one another before addressing the issue of how they should respond to their persecutors. As he does, he blends in the hope they have in following his advice.

They are told to "not repay evil for evil or insult for insult", to "do right" even if they suffer for doing it, and that when someone questions them on why they are acting as they do to have a ready answer, and to deliver it with "gentleness and respect". To do this gives them clear conscience before both God and humanity. No matter what others are doing to them, they will know that their own conduct is blameless. This gives them confidence before God, and will hopefully set an example that will inspire the pagans around them to consider the strength that comes from their faith as well as their example of love and grace. While it's not a given that those persecuting them will experience some conviction of the heart, they know that for some they will realize that wrongness of oppressing and mistreating folks who are doing nothing but kindness and good will be brought to shame. The hope is that conviction will lead them to faith.

The odd exchange here is that while it is the authority of an unbelieving community is what is persecuting them, the expectations of that authority (laws and such) are not necessarily all or perhaps even mostly contrary to Godliness. The culture around the authority may be problematic, but the authority itself is largely fine. To live in as much peace as possible, and to potentially draw the unbelieving to Christ, obedience to the authority around them is how they are obedient to the one they truly are to serve, God.

We can't underestimate the difficulty of this command nor the power of it. Human nature is to rebel against the things that are stepping on us. To fight back. To stand up for ourselves, even if it means stubbornly digging in against otherwise understandable expectations, just to make a point. To continue to obey the authority in the culture that is persecuting takes amazing self-restraint and humility. Even today this is difficult. We do well to heed Peter's words, however. As much as our ability to do this is about honoring God through witness, what is most prevalent in this chapter is what it does for the believer, for us.

Repaying evil with blessing, not with evil or insult brings us back to the Lord's Prayer. In order to do this, there needs to be forgiveness. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." We also must remember that this is the one part of the prayer that Jesus doubles down on. After he recites it He says to the disciples that if they can't forgive others neither should they expect God to forgive them.

In quoting the Psalm, Peter reminds them that their faithfulness will draw God's attention to their prayers, while those who are disobedient will cause God's inattentiveness.

The verse that let's them know that in their suffering they will be blessed uses the same term Jesus uses in the beatitudes. "Blessed are you when you are reviled and persecuted for my name, great is your reward in heaven."

In their suffering, they are put in good company, the company of Christ whom they are called to allow their reverence for to overcome any fear they might have.

We then come to some verses that are a bit confusing. Jesus "died in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit". We however understand that through

the resurrection Jesus died in the flesh and was resurrected in the flesh. So what does this tell us and why is it hopeful to those reading it then? Not unlike we saw in the gospel of John, terms have more than literal meanings. Flesh is the perishable, the impermanent, what can decay. It is also temporary, like the suffering of these faith communities. The Spirit is the victorious, the powerful, the everlasting, the permanent. Christ was victorious, and naturally always alive in Spirit. These believers, holding to their faith, are already alive in Spirit and therefore assured of ultimate victory even if they are persecuted for a time.

Like them, we too are alive in Spirit so long as we are in Christ. Our suffering and trials may be different in our world today than there's then. Nevertheless, we have the same assurance that if respond to them with the same grace, gentleness, kindness, and compassion instructed to these believers, we too are assured of victory and everlasting life.

Then comes this strange statement of Jesus proclaiming to "imprisoned spirits" from the time of Noah. In honesty, this is somewhat confusing and mysterious. There isn't overall agreement on what it means. In truth, any discussion of the spiritual realm, particularly heaven or hell, has to be approached with humility and owning that no one is fully sure what these places look like or entail. Scripture has differing descriptions of them, which makes sense as at best we read human approximations of inexplicable places. We won't know until we get there for sure. For my sensibilities, the agreeing factors seem to be: Heaven is full communion with God. Hell is full separation from God. Each person makes the decision to be in communion with or separate from God in this life, which God honors in the next.

Here, there are two sensibilities on who these "spirits" are. One I believe makes more sense given the context. The two are differed by the question of whether Jesus' spirit ascended or descended.

The descending suggests something similar to what we will find in chapter 4. This is the idea that Jesus went to souls in captivity from before He came on the scene. He preached to them inviting them into relationship with Him. This breaks down in regard to the character of Jesus. The spirits here are specified to be only from the time of Noah and the flood. It doesn't register that Jesus would only offer this relationship to a relatively small portion of the spirits there. The character of Jesus is that He desires relationship with all not some.

The ascending makes more sense. This idea suggests that Jesus went to a level of heaven. At the time there was the understanding that heaven had levels to it, perhaps one of these lower levels being a sort of "prison" for evil spirits held in captivity until the final judgment. In this case, the reference is to the spirits from the time of Noah. Recall that the "sons of God" descended and had relations with women, bearing extraordinary humans, as well as the Nephilim. This is in direct connection to the spread of wickedness across the earth. The wicked spirits imprisoned may well have been these heavenly beings that came to earth with a corrupting influence. We understand other such beings, being satan and his angels, had a similar position. This idea is that Jesus wasn't "preaching", but "proclaiming". Proclaiming the victory of the cross, and that these evil spirits' judgement was certain.

The reason this makes more sense is that in context of the letter, these congregations have been instructed on how to conduct themselves in a hostile region in a way that reflects their faith in Christ. The question then begs "why?" As the letter progresses, we see the promise of blessing, of God's attentiveness to their prayers, of being in company with Jesus, of the hope of bringing others to Christ as well, that their suffering is temporary and their victory eternal, and now that this is assured by the example of evil held in captivity and under the ultimate power and authority of Christ.

The waters of the flood are linked then to baptism as another affirmation that they are indeed redeemed. If we think of the flood on a large scope, we see that while baptism of an individual results in individual redemption, so the flood was intended to redeem the entire world. The wickedness that was on the earth died, with the hope of the rebirth of a new, obedient, godly world through Noah and his faithfulness. They too are living in a wicked world that will one day give way to the fullness of Jesus, who will redeem it by ending all evil and bringing the Kingdom to bear in all its glory. In the meantime, for their part, as they've been advised in this chapter, they have died to their sin and wickedness in baptism and been reborn in the image of Christ.

The chapter ends with an image of certainty through the authority of Jesus. They are assured of all that has been promised because each and every power and authority are under His submission.

1 Peter 3 continues to affirm and encourage these communities under persecution. There is a balance of both advice for how to live as well as the hope of what God has in store for them. While our struggles today are in many ways different from these in ancient Rome, we nevertheless have our struggles, trials, temptations, and so forth. There are those around us who will stir up trouble no matter if we are acting in goodness and in keeping with Jesus. This same advice holds true. We often win others to Christ and are able to have a clear conscience before God not by returning another's bad behavior in kind, but by responding in peace, grace, gentleness, and love. We give no honest reason why criticism should stick and instead "kill them with kindness". In the end, even if we can't persuade the ones causing the hostility, we may reach those looking on from the outside in.

