

FEBRUARY 20, 2022

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON February 13, TNT: What's Next? 2 Corinthians 4:11-5:10

This week we are finishing our series on Transformation and Transition. We've seen so far that there are many aspects to what this looks like. Today we tackle arguably the most amazing transformation and transition we can experience, the transformation and transition from this world to the next. Here's a recap of what we've seen as we've looked at different personalities in the Bible over the past four weeks.

Paul- Transformation can happen quickly. Sometimes it just takes a shift in understanding to completely change our outlook and actions. One key shift can literally color every aspect of our lives. We also saw that there are consequences of transforming. Everyone isn't always happy about it. Paul suffered greatly for his own. Others witnessing it are playing catch up because we haven't yet proven out that we are truly different. We then need to cultivate patience and humility with ourselves and others as we show or see in others that a genuine transformation has occurred.

Nebuchadnezzar- Sometimes the change is a change of circumstances in and around our lives. It can be uncomfortable and unpleasant, even tragic. Yet if we are faithful and looking for God in the midst of it, God can use those circumstances to uplift us, draw us near, and make us far better than we went into the situation on the other side.

David- Transformation is a lifelong process. David's story shows us that we go through transformation after transformation for the entire course of our lives. Sometimes we step forward, sometimes back. We also see that if we remain faithful to God and striving to be in genuinely right relationship with God through it all we too can be considered people after God's own heart.

Garasene Demoniac- This story shows us that sometimes a change only happens after an encounter with Jesus. As Jesus has ascended, it looks different now. It may be an experience of the heart, or as is so often the case we see Jesus in someone around us who is simply responding to being inspired in the heart by the Spirit to guide us. Here there is also consequence. As with the 2000 pigs, there is always a cost to transformation. The question is if us as individuals and those around us are willing to pay it. Some will. Some won't.

Paul in our text today tackles the idea of this transition in a different way than we may be used to. Often it's couched in what heaven will look like. What are the streets? Who's in? Who's out? Paul goes a different route. He speaks of the difference in experience of flesh versus spirit. What is unseen is what we long for (the spirit) and what is seen is what keeps us from it (material/flesh). The longing of the heart to be at home with the Lord is front and center, yet there seems to also be purpose in being in the flesh.

As we get into this, let's dispel two myths.

The first is the preoccupation with what heaven looks like. We like to think about the streets, walls, gates, etc. Yet even scripture doesn't necessarily paint all of these images the same. This doesn't suggest that scripture is inadequate or inaccurate. Rather it points to a simple reality. People are trying to explain the majesty and glory of the divine and the spiritual in concrete terms we can understand.

As we know, God and spirit are too big to bring into the material. We can't express or grasp the infinite in concrete terms. The word "love" isn't nearly enough to account for the breadth and depth of the love of God. So if we focus on these concrete attempts, we're missing the point.

The point is to direct us to the experience, which we know more of and likely should identify with me. It is eternal, and in the unfettered presence of God. There is nothing lacking. There is no sickness, sorrow, or sin. There is no need because all is taken care of by the light of God. This is what we anticipate. This is what we long for.

The second is the judgement seat. There are so many ideas put out about what this looks like. Prominent is the idea that our life will be played out before our eyes and we will have to answer for every misdeed. At the end of that movie, God renders judgement about whether we will go "up" or "down". But there is a problem.

If we believe that God throws our sin into a "sea of forgetfulness" then whatever parts of that reel were problems are erased. If we believe that our faith in Jesus should allow us to stand boldly before the throne, then this idea of a knee knocking, trepidatious place before God shouldn't be in the cards. If we believe in the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, then our redemption is a foregone conclusion because we are saved by grace not works. The idea that we our works disqualify us doesn't stand alongside the notion of grace.

If we are saved, we are saved. The accounting then is less about salvation. It is about reward. What will we receive on the other

side of the veil? Yet even there, what does reward matter? We cast our “crowns” before the throne anyway. And if we are in perfection where nothing is needed and all is amazing, reward holds little value anyway.

Paul goes a little further. He talks about this whole notion of flesh and spirit. This stuff that we can touch and feel only lasts a bit. It is temporal. The spirit, the relationship with God, all of that is eternal. Which is the strange conflict between the two. One is experience, the other hope. But it is the hope that drives us.

Still, there is a separation. The flesh is an obstacle between us and God. The flesh ultimately is where temptation resonates and sin occurs. Yes, we have a sin nature, but something has to be susceptible to it, and that is the flesh.

We have these physical bodies which Paul calls “tents”. They have needs, desires, urges, and so on. We meet them and indulge them in a variety of ways, some to God’s liking others not so much. When we engage them out of line with God we sin. This is a separation from God and why we need the redemption of the cross.

The brain we have is also flesh and blood. I’d suggest this is where our emotional and mental needs arise. Sometimes the physical chemistry of our brain is off and in need of correction. Not unlike meeting the needs of the body, we can meet the needs of the heart and mind in ways that are pleasing and displeasing to God. When we displease God, the flesh has caused a separation in need of redemption.

In order to meet these needs, we have been created as social beings. In other words God has orchestrated the world so that we are the instruments to meet many of the needs the flesh demands. Community is essential to meeting our needs. We come together and fill in the gaps in one another’s lives. Still, not all community is helpful to doing so in a way that is faithful.

So we have the community of faith. We gather with other believers of like mind and spirit. In doing so, we partner with those who are seeking God, used of God, and striving to help us meet our needs in the most Godly way possible.

All the while we long to be home with the Lord. Being absent the body every need and temptation pass away. But we need to do the work of the Lord, and that requires us to be flesh and blood. We are called to live into these flesh and blood lives in a way that honors Jesus for a purpose. Those who don’t yet know Jesus need inspirations and guides to help them see not just the glory of God but also what it looks like lived out in real life and real time. God wants every one of us. Every. One. Of Us. The Great Commission calls us to strive to make this happen and we can’t do that if we’re not present in this physical, material world.

In addition to this purpose, there are other things that we experience in the flesh that we can’t in the spirit. The reason is that the spirit, if it’s in perfection, is thereby self-limiting. There is no need. There is no temptation. All is perfect and glorious, and that’s wonderful. It doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t strive to enjoy these unique experiences in flesh and blood while we are here, journeying, and anticipating the hope of God’s Kingdom.

So what are these benefits of being flesh and blood?

We have the great feeling of being overcomers. When we overcome sin and temptation there is a feeling of accomplishment and pride. If there is no temptation, there is no overcoming.

We have a greater appreciation of what is good because we’ve also experienced what is bad. If everything is perfection, there is no reference point.

We have the privilege and humble joy of meeting one another’s needs. God uses us to do so. If there is no need, there is no place for us to meet something that is nonexistent.

We feel the connection when our lives touch another and we see Jesus in the midst of it. When others come to Christ. One of the great celebrations of the church is baptism/confirmation when someone claims Jesus for their own. This doesn’t happen in heaven. The prerequisite is that we receive Christ in order to be welcomed to heaven. We can’t receive what we’ve already received. This is unique to the flesh.

We have a purpose and a goal. We serve, love, and live striving to please God and show gratitude for what we’ve received in Jesus’ sacrifice. When we arrive in glory, the goal is now attained. We serve on the journey to get home, and one day we arrive home.

Then comes the final great transformation and transition. After our labors in this flesh and blood, concrete world are done, we are welcomed into the home of God’s kingdom forever. It’s why Adam Hamilton’s expression that “the last thing is never the worst thing” is so true. That last thing is a transition to a heaven that will never end nor fade. It is a transformation from this body that experiences pain, need, and temptation to one that is fully at peace in joyful in the presence of God. If we are in Christ this is a foregone conclusion. And so whatever happens in this world, we are assured and hopeful that we are bound for not just good things, but the greatest things in the Kingdom of Heaven.

## BIBLE STUDY

Acts 10 is a major turning point in the book and in the development of the early church. Luke is very “vision heavy” in this passage. The presence of so much divine intervention tells us that this is a watershed moment that God is intentionally orchestrating for the spread of the gospel and the growth of the Kingdom. The two visions have very specific significance. Cornelius’ vision is about preparation and direction. God is getting him ready for something big and giving specific directions about how to find it. Peter’s is different. Peter’s vision is about redefining everything they understand about religion, who is “chosen”, and just how big and broad God’s love and grace are.

We meet Cornelius who is a devout, God-fearing man who is righteous and prayerful. He is also a Gentile. How does this work? How does a Roman centurion come to know the God of Israel and be counted worthy of an angelic visit because of his faithfulness?

At that time, there were Gentile proselytes. This isn’t a convert to Judaism. Rather it is a Gentile who has become curious and fond of the beliefs of the Jews, and embraced some of that belief if not necessarily becoming fully observant themselves. Cornelius had been clearly impacted to a significant point. The three o’clock hour of the vision is also significant.

Remember earlier in the book when Peter and John perform their first healing. It was at three o'clock outside the temple where they found a lame man. The Jews were all gathering at the temple for prayer. Cornelius, not at the temple because not Jewish, was likely observing his own prayer time when God sends the angel calling.

The message is specific and simple. Send for Peter because he's got something to share. Cornelius is obedient and discharges some men for the task.

Meanwhile, as the men are approaching the city where Peter is staying, Peter has his own vision. This is no coincidence. That Peter freshly is given this gift precisely when these men are arriving is clearly God timing. We'll see why in a moment.

Peter's vision is famous. He's hungry and waiting for food. What does God use to send the message? Food! Seeing a picnic smorgasbord Peter is told to "kill and eat". God is permission giving. Peter refuses as an observant Jew. God tells Peter that what God calls clean shouldn't be called unclean. Layer one of the message is there. The dietary laws aren't in play anymore. But what is beyond this, Peter isn't sure. He's given the vision three times and is still wondering what all it means at the end.

This is a great comfort. Too often we are questioning or confused about what God is trying to say to us. We wonder and it may feel like an eternity sorting it out. It may feel like something is wrong with our faith. Nothing is. Even here Peter, the heavy hitter apostle with a ridiculous indwelling of the Holy Spirit, is perplexed. He has a lifetime of having tradition drilled into him. Eat and don't eat. Later we see even that it's to not mingle even a little with the Gentile. They are to be separate. All of us have things bred into us over a lifetime and none of it is easy to break out of. Peter demonstrates this here.

As he's left sorting things out, he hears the Spirit tell him to simply go with these guys that are about to show up. Cornelius' guys. The interaction is bookended with vision. Peter's vision of the food. The voice of the Holy Spirit. The men in order to answer Peter share Cornelius' vision. Peter of course agrees to go with them.

Note, we don't know yet that Peter has figured out the vision.

Admittedly the following is speculation, but what happens on the journey back to Caesarea? They talk. They interact. These Gentiles are likely figuring out something about what makes Peter so special that they were sent to fetch him. Peter for his part is likely starting to see that maybe the Gentiles aren't as bad as he thought. They too can be devout. They too can have a good heart. They too can live pleasing to God.

This is a lesson that people learn age after age. We grow up and people tell us what to think about other folks we've never met. That is what all "those people" are like. We don't know any different so that's what we believe. And if we never break out of where we are and those influences we believe that to some degree for all our lives.

One of the greatest gifts of my life has been that I've landed in jobs that put me elbow to elbow with most all of the people I'd heard stereotypes about growing up. What I've found is that all those negative stereotypes have been for the most part wrong in most cases. People are people no matter what color, orientation, nationality, etc. When we can see that, we can have the kind of breakthrough Peter does regarding Jew and Gentile.

When Peter arrives, Cornelius drops to his knees in worship. Peter must have some divine quality if an angel sent him. Peter does what Peter does. He humbly diverts attention back to God by reminding Cornelius that he's just a simple man, no different from Cornelius himself. In a world where the limelight is craved by so many and it's tempting to bask in the praise of others, being like Peter sets the greater example. Equality among each of us is central to Christianity just as realizing our place under God is central as well. Once again, the vision makes an appearance. Cornelius uses it to introduce Peter and lend him credibility.

After seeing all these faithful Gentiles, the meaning of the vision is clear to Peter and he announces it. God shows no favoritism. "Ish". The grace and message of God are available to all no matter who they are or where they are from. At the same time, there is somewhat of a requisite to experience God's favor. One must be like Cornelius, reverent and living as God calls us to live. This isn't contrary. The message is given to everyone. Missions like Cornelius' however go to those whom God can trust. To those with right hearts who will act as God calls to act.

Peter then breaks into the gospel message. We notice it is drastically different to the way he presented it to the Jews. To the Jews he used tradition and scripture. To the Gentile he more reports on just Jesus. To the Jews he is accusatory. YOU killed Him. To the Gentiles his is informative. THEY killed Him. The message, guided by the Holy Spirit, is tied and given in context that receiver can relate to. Once again, we see a wonderful model for our own evangelism. Meet people where they are that. Don't drag them to where we are. In seeing people in their context we can address what is actually necessary and not just what we think is necessary. The Holy Spirit works powerfully through this to move hearts towards Christ. It clearly happens here.

These Gentiles receive the message and have the Holy Spirit come upon them. Peter boldly proclaims their worthiness to be baptized. And it is here that the major shift occurs.

Peter declares that Gentiles have full and equal share in salvation. He declares them worthy of baptism, and therefore full inclusion into the community of faith. The wall between Jew and Gentile is forever shattered. The church now has a new and enormous mission field, the entire world. The work has gotten so much bigger. The opportunity has gotten bigger. The potential to impact the world for Christ and transform it into the image of God has just become more powerful and profound.

Interestingly as well is that Luke in chapter 9 has Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, begin by converting Jews. Here in 10 Peter, the apostle to the Jews, converts the first Gentiles. Evangelism is equal opportunity for all.

This begins an era in the church that will slowly separate it from being just a sect of Judaism to its own unique faith. That break will also eventually lead to greater persecution from not just Jews, but Gentiles as well.