

MAY 15, 2022

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON May 8, Sermon On The Mount Part 1, Matthew 5:1-12

Today we begin a series on arguably the most famous sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount. We've covered pieces of it before, in fact we covered part of it just last week, but not the whole package. Over the coming weeks we'll take it a little at a time.

The first thing we need to do is look at some details of the sermon and its preaching. This is early in Jesus ministry, so notice the crowd didn't come to him. He went to them. That there would be gatherings of people willing to simply have someone come and start to teach them might seem a little odd to us. Someone brash enough to just approach and address a group of strangers with some kind of authority might seem off putting. But maybe not so much so then.

This was an era where they didn't have easy access to entertainment like we do today. No TVs in living rooms. There weren't so many options you couldn't decide which one. It was simpler, particularly if you weren't among the wealthy. So listening to someone offer up what they had was part of life for many. Later we see in Acts where in Athens Paul took advantage of the fact that the population there loved nothing more than to simply listen to the different philosophers and speakers spill their views in public forums. What did this individual bold enough to talk aloud have to say? Was it worthwhile? Not only was it potential for learning and transformation, at its most base level it was entertainment. That some might have seen it as entertaining may be why sometimes the effectiveness might not have been what we'd expect. We view the speakers like Jesus, Peter, and Paul through our own preconceived lens. They at the time saw them as just one more talking head.

This notion of speaking as entertainment isn't just a there and then issue. Sadly we endure it today, but with more unfortunate motivations. If people listened to be entertained, today too many charged with offering real information and insight into the world speak to entertain. Rather than giving things straightforward it becomes laced with opinion and spin geared to entertain or at least appeal to preconceived notions rather than counter them when necessary. The result is that no one knows who they can trust about what fact because there are a thousand different versions out there.

Thank goodness Jesus isn't that.

The other thing to remember is that fairly early on in His ministry, people seemed to be amazed at Jesus' ability to interpret scripture. He amazed them in the synagogue. As a boy He amazed them in the temple when He was left there after Passover. He was referred to as Rabbi. This wasn't a willy nilly term. He had established His quality and command over scripture. So in addition to the populations need for something to do and listen to, Jesus also had the credibility of his understanding and knowledge. Later in His ministry people would flock to Him because He could work miracles. Here He went to them, and they were compelled or at least curious to listen.

The way He begins the teaching is fantastic and sets up the following material He covers in the sermon. We call this opening piece the beatitudes. We've gone through these one or two at a time before, but this time we'll look at them more as a whole. Seeing the larger picture has something to offer us in seeing what's about to unfold as well as being instructive in our faith and presentation of it here and now.

Notice that each beatitude begins with "Blessed are those that." This is a wonderfully positive way of offering and instruction. It's saying "do this" because if you do you'll be blessed. So essentially what follows is a list of instructions.....or commands. Be peacemakers, be meek, be vulnerable enough to mourn, be bold enough to stand firm in faith even if it means persecution, and so on. Jesus is doing a new thing based on an old model.

Centuries on centuries before another great leader, Moses, also offered up some commands. But they were presented differently. They were "do nots". Don't do this, don't do that. And that model has been followed ever since by so many people of faith. It's all about what NOT to do. And we've reaped the results.

Even Paul recognized the psychological problem with framing things as "do nots". If all we think about is what we're not allowed to do, we get preoccupied with it. Then the temptation is constant in our minds. That constancy makes it all the more likely we'll fall into that sin. What's the best way to get someone to do something? Tell them not to. Or put it in their head so frequently they can't stop thinking about it.

This is why studies show “purity” groups for teens isn’t really effective and in some instances may actually increase the likelihood premarital sex. The entire focus of the group is on the one thing they want the kids to avoid. It’s constant on the brain. If you were a “purity ring” there the reminder is on your finger every time you look at it. Temptation is always raging.

Jesus takes a different route. He tells them what they SHOULD do. DO THIS. It’s direct and give them the right thing to think about and focus on. Think on what God wants us to do, not what God doesn’t. Then we’re more likely to do it. This is why Paul tells us to think on what is good and right. It’s why he tells us to focus on the fruits of the Spirit, not the works of the flesh. If we focus on the fruits we’re more likely to bear them. If we focus on the fruits and pursue them, we won’t have time for all that other nonsense.

If we think about it in terms of freedom and opportunity it becomes a no brainer. With the things we’re not supposed to do, the ceiling of opportunity is the floor. There is no room. With the things we’re called to do, there is no limit. There is no ceiling. So long as we’re exercising in true faith the virtue, there is no boundary other than the boundary of that virtue. But the possibility is endless.

So we have a grand double whammy here. We have the instruction that when we present faith, focus more on what we CAN do than what we can’t. Maybe this means on seeing the part of whomever we’re with that’s already in step with Jesus and encouraging THAT. Maybe this means encouraging living into the things of God, and trusting that the more that happens, the more it will push out those things that aren’t of God.

The other piece is simply grasping where Jesus is about to go. Just like He flips the do vs. do not script, He is about to launch into a clarifying of the Old Testament so that they can begin to see what the drive of the Law is rather than the letter. He’s about to go way deeper than they expect and try to guide them to a clearer grasp of what it means to live rightly before God.

So what about the other half of the “blessed are those”? I want to point only one thing out. None of the blessings are material. None. All of them are about being fed or rewarded internally. It’s about the promise of what comes later and being granted here and now something that contents and eases the heart. This is so counter to our cultural expectations.

When we think reward too often we immediately associate it with a thing or the resources to acquire a thing. This is also a deviation from the Old Testament as well. In the Deuteronomic history, the rule was as follows. Do good and you’ll get material blessing, do bad and you’ll get material curse. Not so here. Here Jesus says do good and you’ll get spiritual blessing. And he doesn’t really address the curse side of it. This is different.....

The point of faith has never been material gain. Those who claim it does are simply playing to the cultural notes of people and shilling them with a false gospel. Jesus right here places the premium not on the rewards of this world, but on the ones that flow to our hearts from God’s throne and await us in the next. And these blessings are beautiful indeed. Who can place a price tag on seeing God, gaining mercy, being offered comfort, or having a secure place in the Kingdom of Heaven?

As Jesus begins this glorious moment, He instantly does something as applicable then as today. He does the unexpected. He re-frames things in ways the uplift and elevate. He encourages. He gives them the instruction of how to act rather than how not to, and bolsters the instruction with blessing. And it’s blessing that the world can’t touch or corrupt because it’s not of this world.

Let’s keep this in mind for ourselves and whomever we come across.

What is good, what is right, think on these things. Do these things. Do them to the extent that the chance to do the wrong things is nonexistent. Look for reward in the right place, the heart. Know that no one can steal it when it resides there. Then pass it along. Look for the best in people. Encourage the Jesus in them that they don’t even know exists yet. Invite them into His presence so that He can reveal the transformation, and open the hear to the Spirit to make it happen.

Just like Jesus long ago tried to shake up this crowd by adjusting their understanding of what God was really up to, we’re in need of that again today. Modern Christianity has made a mess of the gospel. There are so many misconceptions of what it means to follow Jesus. You and I have the chance to shake it up. To show them that the God they think we serve isn’t what they think at all, but rather a God far more gracious, mighty, forgiving, and incredible than they’ve ever been shown.

BIBLE STUDY, Acts 20

The opening verses of this chapter remind us that Paul’s travel itinerary was set before the situation that erupted over the silversmith Demetrius. He knew where he was headed, and now he starts in that direction. As Paul travels, that he continues to stop and encourage/uplift/instruct believers reminds us as well that Paul has a grand habit. When he comes across or plants fledgling congregations he continually takes advantage of the opportunity to build them up and make sure they are staying true to the path that he had placed them on.

The list of people Paul trusts to lead on the way says a few things to us. First, it tells us that there are folks he trusts with carrying on his mission. Second, perhaps it signals that there is a cadre of leaders Paul has formed because he knows he’s headed onto a place of no return. He’s getting ready to pass the torch.

In Philippi, he observes Passover. This is telling. Of course as an observant Jew he’d want to observe it in Jerusalem, but he can’t get there yet. So there, in Philippi he celebrates. Philippi is known as somewhat anti semitic. Yet even in this environment Paul has instituted a congregation of believers, and even though Paul is a Christian to the core, he won’t shake his heritage. He loves his Jewish brothers and sisters. He embraces and celebrates his Jewish tradition.

Next comes one of my favorite stories. Paul has limited time where he’s at. We see him pass over Ephesus to an extent which may seem strange given his time there. But he wants to get to Jerusalem for Pentecost. So he preaches....and preaches....and preaches....and preaches....all....night. One poor young man tries to hang on high in the rafters but falls asleep and falls to the ground three stories down. Perhaps this is an instruction to not be too long winded?

They think he’s dead. Paul lets them know he is not. Now here is an interesting sense about this story. Frequently it’s suggested that Eutychus is dead and Paul revives him. But in truth the way it’s written it’s less a miracle and more Paul just paying attention. Everyone assumes he’s dead from the fall, but Paul actually checks him out. In doing so he notes the guy is alive. This is a great reminder

of Paul's integrity and what we should all aspire to. He doesn't claim a miracle where there isn't one. Too often folk claim something that isn't real just because another might assume it is. Doing so risks the integrity of legitimate ministry.

What follows is that while Paul isn't going to make a long term stop in Ephesus he does pause to speak to the elders in the church there. This is no small thing.

He reminds them of his example and ministry. He reminds them of his integrity and humility. He reminds them of his boldness, and his persecution. He reminds them of his trials. He also lets them know that in every city it's evident that prison and perhaps worse await him. He knows what his message stirs up and that it carries with it great consequence. Sharing this leads up to this foreboding sense that his end is imminent. They will never see him again. Where he is bound, Rome, will be his ultimate demise.

Knowing this, Paul is calling the Ephesian leadership to task. If he, their founder, is about to pass on, someone has to take up the mantle of leadership. Someone has to hold the line and keep the message honest and correct. He is passing the legacy of his ministry in Ephesus and the region to this leadership. It reminds us that as we minister in our day and age, it is our task to not just assume the responsibility ourselves but also groom others to take our place when we are gone. Solid successors don't happen by accident, at least not often. They are intentionally cultivated. That Paul has returned over and over to communities he's founded, encouraging and instructing them, is a sign that he's always been looking for longevity for these communities. Not merely a reliance on himself and his position.

Then comes the warning. This is something many aren't want to do. We don't want to accuse others of sabotage or distorting a message. We don't want to risk painting another in a bad light. Yet Paul finds the medium. He doesn't name names in terms of perpetrators. Yet he does call out what is coming. There will be those even in their own number who will rise up to distract and destroy the message, whether they recognize it or not. Culture and ambition will creep into the church and misguide it. Be on the lookout. Don't lose vigilance because the stakes are high.

Even today there are those around and sadly sometimes among us who twist faith to their own ends. Sometimes it's conscious, sometimes malicious, sometimes it's the product of how they have been trained in what constitutes their faith, sometimes it's indoctrination. There are many reason people twist faith and scripture. Typically I find that the more aggressively someone shouts about being wary of being led astray, particularly if attached to it is the threat of harsh consequence, the more likely it is that they have engaged in scripture twisting themselves. It follows that what we're most guilty of we are engaging in ourselves.

Paul here isn't engaging in that aggressive, harsh chatter here. He's simply doing faithful diligence to make sure that these Ephesian leaders are prepared for what awaits them down the line. While it's not explicit, I think we can safely speculate something about why Paul may not need more than this simple word of caution.

Luke reminds us that Paul had been with the Ephesians for three entire years. Through this time we know he more than simply preached to convert, he mentored and taught. The way to prepare one another for the eventuality of those who would distract or distort scripture and our faith is to simply instruct them solidly on what scripture says and how to live it out. It's that simple. Not easy. But simple. It's this foundation that allows leaders like Paul to only have to give a simple caution rather than jump on a soap box with a bullhorn.

As the chapter winds down, we see Paul affirming his attitude and spirit throughout his ministry in Ephesus. These final verses dovetail well with the verse prior when he reminds them that he is innocent of any of their blood. What Paul is communicating to them is that when he was among them, he gave them his absolute all. Nothing was held back, and his love for them spurred on his bravery to say what needed said and do what needed done, whatever the consequence may be. In moving to the next leg of his journey, Paul is continuing to give his ministry his all. Always Spirit led, he follows where God leads even and particularly when it's difficult.

This isn't merely Paul tooting his own horn. It is a reminder to these leaders whom he commissions in verse 32 of how he wants them to conduct themselves. Just as he gave his all and put those he served above and before himself, now this group of church leaders should do likewise. Once again, we see a tremendous example in Paul's witness and words. If we profess to be people of faith, it's our responsibility to do much more than just be able to speak the right things and teach correctly. Our example has to illuminate all of it. Word and deed must be congruent for our witness to have a full and powerful impact. Paul is a pinnacle role model for this truth. Finally Paul departs company with his friends and fellow leaders in Christ. Imagine their heartache at knowing they'd never see him again. Imagine their fear of not knowing what awaited their friend and mentor. Distraught isn't near enough a term.

As the chapter closes, it's a reminder to all of us to value and cherish the people who we hold dear and who guide and lead us. Like these Ephesians, we don't know how much time we truly have with anyone. The time to appreciate will always be now. So when the time comes to part ways, the love and appreciation have already been said time and again.