

SEPTEMBER 25, 2022

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON Sept 18 'Do You Believe?' 2 Corinthians 5:15-21, Colossians 3:9-17

This week we begin a new series tackling the subject of evangelism. We're going to look at what it is, what it's not, why it's a frightening proposition to many, what Biblically effective evangelism looks like, and this morning we consider something that is both foundational to our personal faith as well as just how fervent we are about the idea of evangelizing our communities.

This foundational piece is the understanding that when we come to Christ we become a new creation. We "take off the old person and put on the new". The question is just how genuinely and deeply do we believe in this central truth to our faith?

For us personally it's the understanding that coming to faith and receiving God's saving grace involves an encounter with the Holy Spirit. This encounter in many ways resets our heart, our sense of values, and the way we relate to and with the people and world around us. We aren't the same as we were. We are new.

This is so central that while the works that follow haven't earned redemption, they are a sign as to whether or not we have been redeemed. Throughout the New Testament it is made clear that as much as believing is essential, behavior is also tied closely to the genuineness of our faith. Who we become and what we do is a sign of what we actually believe rather than just what we say we believe.

I came across a meme a few weeks ago that hits this particular nail on the head. It says "you can memorize the Bible and still flunk Christianity". It's not just a head thing, it's a heart things. That heart thing is transformative to who we are.

We typically see this transformation most starkly in those who come to faith in their more adult years. The habits formed through life that are counter to God's desire shift relatively quickly and heavily for many people. This makes that transformation more evident and notable. What we can't forget is that this first transformation isn't, and can't be, the last.

That the change is often so drastic has led to some unfortunate theology. The idea is that you're not really redeemed unless you know the date that you had that major shift and became a new creation. It's your spiritual birthday and so significant that it shouldn't be forgotten.

The problem is that this is based in erroneous thinking that may be rooted in scripture, but doesn't account for the passage of time. As we read the New Testament this gospel message of salvation was brand new. Every new Christian had that rebirth experience. Thousands of years later we are in different territory. There are still new converts later in life, but there are also millions and more who were born into the faith. Most of us this morning fall into this category. We've never known anything but Jesus and being grown in our relationship with Him. There's never been that major moment of conversion because we've been Christian our entire lives.

This doesn't mean we don't become a new creation. It just means it's less extreme. Cradle to grave we are on a journey whether we are born into this faith or not. None of us will ever be perfect, but we must all move towards it. John Wesley famously said our lives are a journey on towards perfection. Little by little we find those pieces of our hearts and actions that are not in keeping with God's desires. Each time we are called to let the Holy Spirit transform that piece and make us more like Christ.

It doesn't matter if the change is big or small, each time it happens we become a new creation. We aren't who we were and don't desire to go back. Newness isn't only the massive, earth shaking change. It's also the subtle and nuanced. In fact, I believe the longer we walk this Christian path the less extreme the transformations become. It's only logical that

the bigger adjustments give way to smaller ones. Regardless, every one is significant.

Truthfully, this consistent transformation is necessary. It is the mark that we have truly believed and that Christ is at work in us. The Christian life is never stagnant. It is ever seeking to be more like Christ.

To be more like Christ is to love the world enough to invite it into relationship with Him. We see others as He does. The transformation that takes place we trust sets us apart because of the uncommon love and grace we show others.

This idea of becoming a new creation is foundational not only for our personal faith, but also to urge us on to evangelism. Evangelism is simply bringing Christ to the world and seeking to bring the world into connection with Him.

The question before us, however, is whether or not we believe that everyone has the potential to become a new creation. We believe that we can, but do we believe that for every person out there who still hasn't yet believed?

This begins to ping at the core of how we see others, particularly those different from us. Who in our individual values and sensibilities are those people? Who are the ones we'd rather not see darken the door of the church? Who is too unlike us to ever fit in or be welcome? Who do we cringe at the idea of going to and rubbing elbows with? Who are the ones that we hope someone else will do the work of Christ with them because we're not inclined to do it ourselves?

If we want to be Christlike and Biblical, the answer should be no one. For Jesus, no one is off limits. He went to and wanted all people of all types and all dispositions. As the gospel spread to not only Jew, but Gentile as well the mission field expanded to every soul in creation. God wants them all. And God uses God's people to bring in the harvest.

There is no such question as "who does God want us to go to?" Everyone we can. Simple as that. Perhaps more targeted might be "you know all those people other church folk don't want anything to do with? Go to them...." We'll explore this idea in more detail further into the series.

The point is that our job isn't to pick and choose who we think deserves the gospel. Our job is to offer it to anyone and everyone. And if we are successful the face of our congregation will change. New people from walks of life we may never have dreamed could be added to the Kingdom and show us the genuine power of God in action, transforming their lives before our eyes. Likely as we see them transform we will as well.

The power of God in action. This is the key. Every single person has the potential to become a new creation. Not everyone will. But everyone can. The reason is that the power of God within is what drives the transformation. It's not all us, our desire, our willpower. It is the Holy Spirit convicting us, strengthening us, humbling us, and guiding us that puts us on that transformative path. Because it's God's power and not our own, all of us are equally able to experience the wonder of becoming a new creation.

How much do we believe in this reality of becoming?

Do we truly keep seeking in our own experience to be renewed and changed? Is our Christian journey genuinely an example of constant becoming more like Jesus and a continuous cycle of dying to those parts of ourselves we discover are sinful and being reborn a new creation absent that sin? Do we believe in the power of God enough to trust that anyone and everyone has a shot? If we do, do we put energy behind that belief and actually go to those that others have written off or we've been told aren't worth our time because we know that God desires them dearly? Do we allow the power of God that transforms to give us humility and boldness to go to those we've been taught to fear or we perceive as less than?

There is a beauty to believing this truth of becoming a new creation in it's fullness. If I believe it for myself, then I must believe it for others. God doesn't make distinctions on who has the Holy Spirit available to help us in this process. In this lies hope for the world.

The other beauty is for those times when perhaps we aren't feeling the best about ourselves. We are stuck in whatever circumstance and wonder if things will ever change. If I believe in the power of transformation for others, then I have to believe it for myself. For the same reason. God doesn't leave people out. If we seek transformation we will find it.

There is hope for the future.

If we want to see a better world, in many ways it begins with a genuine embrace of the reality that good and Godly transformation is possible for all. It's our job to allow the power of God to work in us, and then allow that power to guide us to those around us who are ready to have someone lead them to Christ and welcome them into a discipling community.

Little by little the world transforms as the people in it do.

BIBLE STUDY Acts 22

Acts 22 is a direct continuation of the scene at the end of 21. The angry mob is still looking for Paul's death and he addresses them. At the end of 21 we get the tease that he speaks to them, here we see what he actually says.

The first thing he does as a device to settle things down is speak to them in Aramaic. This takes them off guard not unlike Paul's speaking Greek took the guard a little off when they asked who he was. Aramaic is a very similar language to Hebrew. Hebrew is the Israelite, Aramaic is Syrian but both share a lot in common. The point here is that in speaking this language he is speaking the language of the crowd. They are Jews and so hearing Paul speak in their own tongue takes them by surprise enough that it settles them down so he can say his piece.

This is a great tactic for any tense situation. Do something surprising to grab their attention. The unexpected has a way of breaking through layers of tension to make way for at least momentary ability to get a word in. Even Jesus used attention grabbers for the sake of getting people to listen to His message. He worked miracles so that they would know His identity and hopefully give credibility to His words.

Once he has their attention he begins by identifying himself as one of them. He is a fellow Jew that is part of a dispersed nation trying to make his way in the world. He gives them his pedigree as a Pharisee. He's no ordinary Jew, he's one who has been schooled in the Law and knows their tradition well. The beginning of his introduction concluded with his passionate persecuting of Christians.

He's building some rapport and connection with them by identifying with who they are and a shared disdain for this new upstart strain within Judaism that is causing a blasphemous uproar.

As he's done throughout his missionary work he starts from a point of commonality. Any time we want to be persuasive this is generally the best tactic. Beginning from a point of disagreement or conflict sets a poor stage. At the outset the conversation is laced with angst and depending on how stark the disagreement even hostility. Commonality connects and eases the atmosphere. We begin able to see one another over a shared interest, value, belief, etc.

If Paul has made any headway it's short lived as he continues his speech. He shares his conversion story. Trying to add some credibility he acknowledges to the crowd that he had not just one but two personal experiences with Christ through that conversion story. The first is on the road to Damascus when he is blinded. Then he tells them of his healing and the instructions given to him by Ananias. This is followed by Paul in the temple in a trance and both hearing and seeing Jesus who instructs him to leave the city for his own protection.

He slyly finishes his story by sharing what he said to Jesus in that interaction. To Jesus it was confessional and recognizing why he was in danger. I suggest that here the sharing of it as a conclusion is an attempt, perhaps feeble, to connect again as he did at the outset. He shares the irony that has put in him in his predicament. He was there at the stoning of Stephen and everyone saw him there and knew he was all about wiping out the Christians. Now in that same city he must flee for his life, but Jesus informs him that Paul still has a use. He will be the apostle to the Gentiles.

In one relatively brief speech, Paul tries to connect with the angry crowd and at the same time affirms the very reason they are out to get him. They respond as crowds in Paul's experience respond. They are irrational, angry, and still want him dead.

We can think we're slick sometimes. We find ourselves in some kind of jam and hope we can talk our way out of it. We may even think we can make rational out of the irrational, order out of chaos. So we try whatever tricks we can muster to get in the good graces of whomever we are speaking with wanting to both get away from the danger and perhaps even win someone over to our way of thinking.

When a person or crowd is irrational, rarely does this strategy work. This is the nature of irrational, hyperemotional, and chaotic. The reason has checked out and speaking to it generally falls on deaf ears. Literally they may seem to be listening but in truth not listening at all. Worse, if they are angry with us they may be listening but only for the word or phrase that can be twisted to fire their anger further. Here it seems that Paul's words simply stoked them up even more.

Sometimes it may be wiser to simply quietly exit than engage.

If the situation requires aid for us to get out of it, sometimes the ones saving us might still have less than our best interests in mind.

This seems to be the case with Paul. The authorities spare him from the crowd. They also want to know why all the fuss has been stirred up. They take him into the barracks, shackle him, and prepare to flog him. This seems a bit strange. Flogging was a means of getting someone to spill information. Paul doesn't seem like he's looking to withhold, yet they are going to flog him anyway.

This reads cruelly. A man was being threatened by a mob. No one could give a straight answer as to why he was being threatened and beaten. They pull the victim into the barracks for his own good and he tries to address/settle the crowd. The crowd goes ballistic again and now their answer is to victimize the victim? This is crazy logic. Yet it happens even today.

There are people who are victimized and when they go to the authorities they end up being the ones interrogated. They get their lives scrutinized and passive accusations offered in the form of questions retraumatize the victim and try to shift blame away from the perpetrator. Cases of assault against women are notorious for this. "What were you wearing?" "Did you lead him on?" "Did you have anything to drink?" "Why were you there to begin with?" None of these have anything to do with whether or not the assault is acceptable nor where the fault lies. If it occurred, it's the assailant, period. Yet too often victims are made to feel shame and fault. The victim is revictimized.

Paul has another trick up his sleeve. Before they deliver the beating he informs them that he is a Roman citizen. That he was born a Roman citizen tells us something about Paul's status. That meant both parents were Roman citizens. Because Rome had conquered so many people, there were plenty assimilated into the empire but they weren't necessarily citizens. Citizenship could be granted by certain officials, but perhaps this included "greasing the wheels" so to speak.

This may be what the commander was referring to when he said his citizenship was expensive. The result was that because of Paul's citizenship he was under certain protections that others were not. They immediately back off and ultimately release him but not without a request.

Sometimes people are hesitant to use status or some other form of advantage or privilege to get themselves out of a jam. If the circumstance is unmerited, as it was for Paul, there is no shame in doing as Paul did. It's wisdom. Taken out even further, as people of faith if we have some influence or a leg up in whatever circles we find ourselves, we actually should use that influence to further the Kingdom of God. As much as we are able, all that we have God can use for the good of spreading the light of Christ. We typically think in terms of personal giftedness or material resources. Status and influence are just as valuable currency. The world uses such things for selfish and evil purposes, we can certainly use them for Godly ones.

The request is to figure out what all was going on that created the scene from which Paul was rescued. They want Paul to return and stand before the Sanhedrin and the chief priests so they can sort it out. They want to do it orderly and peacefully.

Isn't this a bit silly? There is this mob scene that turned violent, then the centurions who wanted to find out why turn violent on the victim to extract information he would have gladly given. It isn't until they are snapped to their senses that they hatch on a much more orderly, civil, and likely productive strategy. That strategy may have been the one they should have tried at the outset.

Rome had sufficient force to put down a mob. Sadly when circumstances turn aggressive and chaotic, even the ones charged with calming the circumstance can be drawn into that spirit. Then they too have compromised judgement and may act in incorrect and even violent fashion. If cooler heads don't prevail the damage done exceeds what was the initial problem, sometimes tragically.

As people of Christ we are called to be people of peace. In a world so easily stirred up and pushed to the edge, we are also called to be the calm in the room when everything else is chaos. We are called to be separate from the anger and unreasonable, seeking the peace of Christ in our hearts so that we can respond in a way that is helpful and seeks resolution genuinely and civilly.

As we move towards the end of Paul's journey we see that he continues to be a figure that sparks great things in his ministry and elevated anger in his opponents. So much can be drawn in parallel to what Paul experienced and what we see in our world today. People seem to be people no matter the age. Paul is an example of trying our best to stay faithful, trust God, use wit and wisdom for the purposes of good, and rise above the chaos that sadly seems to surround him wherever he goes.