

DECEMBER 11, 2022

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON December 4, 'Joy' Romans 14:16-19, James 1:2-4

This second week of Advent we focus on the theme of Joy. Last week was hope, which we'll see in some ways is actually a springboard for joy. Something that some of you may have heard me say before is that there is a difference between happiness and joy. It may be word games for some folks, but for this morning let's agree for the moment that these are two different things simply for the purpose of understanding the difference between an experience that is generated internally versus externally.

Happiness depends on circumstances. It is this warm, fuzzy feeling that comes about because something is acting on us in a pleasant way. We get a compliment. Someone shows us attention. We ride a jet ski or a roller coaster. A game or some contest is won. Whatever it is, the feeling comes because of something that has happened in our life or environment.

The problem with the feeling, however, is that it is fleeting. It doesn't last. Once the rush of the experience dies down, the feeling too fades away. Sometimes worse yet, if the circumstances change drastically for the worse, the feeling can be stolen and replaced with sadness, frustration, anger, etc. This is the danger of relying on what is around us and outside of us for satisfaction. We aren't ever in control of our baseline state of being. The world is. In Tae Kwon Do, the kids have something they repeat every class. "I happen to the world, the world does not happen to me." This is trying to instill in them that a life spent simply reacting is a life out of control.

It's also why people fall into the trap of "busyness" and constantly chasing the next experience or the next "thing". It's the constant effort to satisfy something that is unsatisfiable. It's a bottomless hole that always demands more yet never delivers contentment.

In fact, as we move through Advent, we ultimately land on the theme of peace. There are lots of kinds of peace. One of them is a state of content with our lives. If we are always waiting for something or someone else to make us happy, contentment will be continually elusive.

Joy is different. Joy is from within. Biblically it HAS to be.

Scripture tells us to "rejoice". Not as a suggestion, but as an almost command despite circumstances. How can this happen if it's dependent on outside forces?

James talks about being joyful for our trials. Now, there's an important note here just to make sure we're reading this correctly. James isn't saying that God is giving us trials to strengthen our faith. Rather he is saying that when we suffer trials God uses it to strengthen our faith. Comparable to Romans "God works all things together for the good."

But this sense that we should be joyful amidst trials tells us a lot about the nature of joy. Trials by definition stink. They are hard and challenging. Frustrating, infuriating. Tragic and heartbreaking. Point being they do NOT lend themselves to creating nice, pleasant feelings for us. Yet we can still have joy. Because joy has nothing to do with circumstance and everything to do with God, and with hope.

When we look at James' statement, it's not just asking us to be joyful. It's giving a reason for that joy. In the end, we'll be closer to God, our faith will be stronger, our character will be more like Christ's. This is hope. Even when things go sideways in the most colossal way, there is hope because God is working in the midst of each and every circumstance of our lives. If God is working, that means that even if the outcome isn't what we want it to be, somewhere in the situation there will be a bright spot. There has to be.

The hope of God in all circumstances is why we can have joy no matter what. Not some silly, superficial goofiness. A settled, deep seated joy that is rooted in knowing that our God is at the center of everything, speaking to us, and using everything to draw us nearer, make us better, and use us to change the world more into the image of God's Kingdom.

The question before us then is where are our heads and hearts in any circumstance?

Think about the Nativity story. Mary and Joseph in the most unpleasant of circumstances. Gross stable. Nasty animals. Hunted by Herod. What do we read about Mary when they received their visitations to the Christ child? She held those moments as treasures in her heart. She wasn't jaded by the situation or the trappings. She allowed herself to see the good and the blessing. And treasures of the heart are a fuel source for joy. They rest within us always there as a reference point for the good and for the God in our lives. They inspire and bolster us when our circumstances turn grim. And joy springs.

If we embrace the fullness of Jesus, and the Spirit of God, what do we allow our hearts to gravitate towards? Is it the harshness of a moment, or the hope that God is speaking through that moment? Are we hiding from the hurt, or do we face it with God at our back allowing the Spirit to grow us? Do we focus on all the dark or do we look for the bright spot? Because even if most of it is bright spot, it's possible to find that one little darkness and zone in on that.

I want to encourage all of us to focus on the bright spots. This isn't head in the sand to the problems around us. It's allowing ourselves to focus more on the God than the garbage. It's looking for the opportunity rather than a reason to bail. It's what makes us active players in bringing about the Kingdom of God as opposed to riding the bench watching others and hoping someone else does it.

The Nativity story is all about Jesus. But it's also about two people, a couple, who refused to be beaten down by circumstance and fulfill their calling. In Mary, we see a young woman who not only endured but did so joyfully and brought about our Lord and Savior. What might we do if we follow suit and refuse to let circumstance trample us down and instead look for the bright spot and call of God, and allow the joy within to fuel all that we do to draw the world to our Rock and our Redeemer?

BIBLE STUDY Romans 3

Paul has spent significant time levelled at Gentile and Jew alike. Here he begins to address the nature of how Jew and Gentile relate to one another, particularly with regards to the idea of Law and covenant. The question at the outset shouldn't be taken as a statement. It also isn't necessarily a question teeing up some sense of superiority as God's "chosen" people. The value of being part of the Jewish family (evidenced by circumcision), is that of responsibility. In chapter 2 we are told that the "world blasphemes God" because of them. This is a clear sense that the responsibility was to show the world what living in the light of God looks like, and they did not. So the nation of God makes a mockery of Godliness, and the world was looking on.

What comes next is a critical sensibility that we need even today. Yes, the Jews were entrusted with the words of God to live them out as an example to the rest of the world. If they didn't take that responsibility seriously, is that a problem of God or God's Word? Absolutely not.

This is comparable to our current state within Christianity. So many push aside Christ and even scripture because they see the ones who are supposed to be living it out making such a mess of things. The representatives failings are mistaken for an unworthiness of the Words they are supposed to follow. To push aside the instructions because the ones charged with following them aren't doing so doesn't nullify the truth in those instructions.

So it is with the Word of God. Whether the Jews of the Old Testament or the Christians then and now, God's word is true and correct. Our faithlessness doesn't change that.

Then comes a couple arguments Paul has obviously heard before and he shuts them down quickly.

"Is God just in judging the world if it's our problems that highlight God's goodness?" The answer is pretty simple here and we have a comparison in our own fallen existence. Is a parent unjust for disciplining a child because the parent is also flawed? No. It's the job of the parent to discipline, and we hope and trust that life and experience has given that parent wisdom to do so correctly, fairly, and with love behind it. If we know that amongst ourselves, how much more fair is it for the perfect Creator of all to render judgment on that creation? God isn't bound by the limitations of humanity because God isn't limited, nor is God shackled by the same selfishness that runs rampant over us.

"If my lying makes God's truthfulness more glorious why is it sin? Why not do evil so good can come from it?" These are children's arguments. They are looking for excuse to do wrong in the full knowledge of what is right. Paul's exasperated statement about their condemnation makes total sense. If we know right, why do we keep making excuses to do wrong? We've seen Paul demonstrate that even without the Law people can still do what's right and correct. Gentiles will sin apart from the Law and be judged, Jews will sin with the Law and be condemned by it.

That Paul is making it clear that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile is hammered home in this next segment. If there was any notion that he was favoring one or the other up to this point, those notions must be put to rest here. "Do we (the Jews) have any advantage? No!" Everyone is under the same power of sin.

What comes next is a litany from the Old Testament. Quote after quote Paul states the unfortunate condition of humanity. We are consistently under sin's sway and give into it however is in our unique experience to do. The Law can't save us from sin, but it can make us conscious of it.

This is an important distinction we say in chapter 2. Simply having the Law doesn't make a difference. It's what is done with the Law that matters. It is a guide to Godly living before God and one another. Knowing it helps us know right from wrong. But since none of us can follow it in its entirety, we can't be saved simply by knowing it.

The last piece of this chapter is rooted in an understanding of the Law, or of Torah. Vs. 21 talks about to what the Law and prophets testify, and that is to Jesus. He continues to drive into the equality of Jew and Gentile and the great leveller being that all of us sin.

He also goes a step further which is incredibly encouraging. If we are all together because we all sin, then we are also all together because we all have a common redeemer, Christ. God is God of all, and if God is consistent and just it only stands to reason that the same means of grace and salvation is offered to all. It's a one size only plan. That plan is all about faith.

All the way back in Genesis, the beginning of Torah, relationship with God begins with faith. We'll see much more of this in chapter 4. But before there could be Law there had to be faith in the God that would give it. In order to conceive of following that Law, there had to be faith in the God who authored it to trust it is correct. If salvation is only about the Law, then it only applies to those who have the Law, the Jews. So if the claim is that salvation is available to everyone, then there must be some other common denominator at work. Faith is that denominator.

Seeing the Torah for the Jews as about morality and works misses the point and is the origin of so many misunderstandings about life, God, and even the Messiah. The focus is on the wrong thing. Yes, right living is important, but putting the works before the faith can send us down the wrong trail. We can forget the intention of the One who calls us to those works and make the works a god in and of themselves.

Faith, conceived first in Abraham isn't about a favored status of his ancestors. It is about a responsibility and privilege that the path to salvation would come from his family line one day.

When Paul talks about upholding the Law through faith, he is reminding us that the Law was fulfilled in Christ, and so our faith in Jesus upholds this thousands of years long journey that salvation would come through faith in the One who fulfills it, not in being able to perfectly perform it.

Once again we see modern day instruction. So much of Christianity can get wrapped up in our own codes of what we think is right and wrong, who is in and who is out, who is favored and who is not. We put the cart before the horse when we push people towards our own conceptions of works without introducing them to fellowship with Christ Himself. Faith is the beginning of transformation.

What is and is not correct through the ages has shifted. The shift is not because God's word changes or that God changes. Rather the shift occurs because age to age we hopefully come a little closer to understanding what God has always been speaking through God's Word. So we correct our path accordingly.

In other words, faith that God is never done with us allows us to hear the Holy Spirit in order to continually be correcting our expectations and attitudes. In this humility, we can freely invite all into our midst, and more importantly into the presence of God through Christ. As we love one another through our own journeys, we are used of God and watch God work to transform each of us more into the works we were created for all along. But it is the common faith and common pulling in that direction together that brings the change authentically.

Today Christians often see themselves as the "chosen" people. If so, we need to remember how Paul defines it, not how we do. We do not enjoy favored status. We are not God's "teacher's pets." To be chosen is to be invited into a great responsibility, and yes, also a privilege. We are the ones called to invite the world into relationship with Christ. We are the ones purposed to light up the world for the Christ. If that light isn't shining, isn't drawing people, then we need to either figure out what isn't shining correctly, or perhaps start to lift up the shades of our experience and lives to the genuine light of Christ can be seen all the more brightly.