

JANUARY 8, 2023

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON January 1, 1 Samuel 20: 28-34, 2 Samuel 12: 15-23 'Holding On and Letting Go'

Today we enter a new year. The way the world has largely agreed to approach this day is oddly Christian, even if many people who celebrate are not. The day itself has nothing truly special about it. It's just another day with the only difference being most of us will write our date wrong for a few weeks or so. The significance is in what we impart to that day.

Every year social media, conversations, entertainment and so on are filled with the cliches about clean slates, "new year new you", resolutions and goal setting. None of this is bad. In fact while the tropes are limited and restricted in their messaging, they reflect something that is incredibly Christian. They reflect the idea of transformation, and a key component of that being letting go of the past to pave the way for a better future. At our core as people of faith we look to be transformed daily. We also believe strongly in the idea of forgiveness and releasing past offenses for the sake of a clearer mind and more gracious and peaceful heart that allows us to seize opportunities to grow and become more.

The reason I say that the quotes often used are limited is that they don't acknowledge something that is before us very prevalently the week leading up to New Year's. As much as we'd like a "clean slate" or to fully "let go" of the past we can't. Truthfully we don't want to. Honestly we shouldn't want to let go of all of the past. Amidst the statements about moving on and moving better in the new year, the week is filled with all of the venues of communication remembering the year before. Lists of best and worst moments, biggest news stories, most heartwarming human interest stories, best and worst songs, movies, sports moments, and the list goes on. The point being that even though we have phraseology that points to clean slates and letting things go traditions surrounding the day we're supposed to do so are intended to make us look back, remember, and ultimately reflect on all that's transpired.

Looking back isn't a bad thing. The past has made us who we are, for better or worse. There are people who matter in our histories. There are grand successes and abysmal failures. There is gain and loss. As much as we'd like to erase the bad things, we don't want to erase the valuable wisdom and lessons that we gained from them. The amazing people who have inspired us, especially those that we've lost, we don't want to fade into forgetfulness. We hang on to their memory for comfort, inspiration, and joy.

So the question isn't about forgetting what's been. It is about other things. It's about where our primary focus lies. Is it dwelling on yesterday? Is it living in the glory of days gone by to the holding pattern of today. Is it hanging on to bitterness and offenses that continue to live in our hearts and minds? Is it looking forward to what opportunities might present themselves? Is it preparing today for the knowns and unknowns of tomorrow? Is it looking to invest time in what builds up rather than waste time? Is it intentionality taking care of ourselves to make the most of where we are going?

Are we more looking forward or looking back? The weight of that focus determines a lot about what we will make of the coming year.

When we look back, how do we do it? Is it clingy or allowing the memories to do their job inspiring us and moving on to what matters, acting here and now? The past can't be changed, the future has yet to be written, so the one thing that we can manage is the right now. This morning we're going to look at two examples of how we look at the present and past and what it determines for our future.

First we look at Saul. Saul had the privilege and honor of being the first king of Israel. He also had some flaws. He had difficulty following instructions. After he had attacked the Philistines and agitated them, he was worried about retaliation. Samuel was to come and make offerings to the Lord asking for God's favor and protection. He asked Saul to wait seven days for him to arrive. At the end of the seven days Saul's men got restless and since Samuel hadn't arrived decided to do it himself. As we was making the offerings Samuel arrived, and gave Saul a good scolding. Another time Saul was told by God to destroy a group of people, kill their king and all their livestock. Instead, Saul killed the people but spared the king, taking him prisoner, and took the best of the sheep and cattle. God was displeased and at this point removed God's blessing on Saul as king. To the point that Samuel and Saul parted ways never to meet again.

Samuel goes and anoints David the new king. Saul doesn't know this. David doesn't really know what all this entails, but he does know that Saul still reigns. In fact Saul's reign lasted 42 years.

What follows after is a trend in Saul that leads to misery and madness. He can't let go of bitterness, jealousy, and anger. In so doing he misses out on great opportunity and nearly kills his own son.

In a battle with the Philistines this young man, David, shows up and slays their champion Goliath. He goes on to prove himself a great warrior and leader. God's hand is clearly resting upon him, His victories are so incredible that the people begin to sing songs about him. What this conjures up in Saul is jealousy and bitterness. These become so cemented in

Saul and he refuses to let them go. Time after time Saul tries to kill David. He chases him through the country hunting him down. Looking at his actions the unwillingness to let go is clearly driving him mad. Mad enough that at one point when he begins to perceive that his beloved son Jonathan is helping David we are told that he takes a javelin and throws it at him attempting to murder him in a fit of rage.

This is the path that mishandling our present, and dwelling bitterly on the past places us on. It is fraught with misery and a troubled mind and spirit. Often the poor choice in the present is pawned off as the responsibility of the one we are bitter at, further fueling the cycle. It also causes us to miss out on what good thing might be right before our eyes. Imagine a potentially different outcome had Saul been able to get over his own pride.

Saul could have seen this promising young man with the hand of God on him who had saved the battle and lifted him up. He could have taken credit for "finding" this amazing soldier and leader. Even if the motives were selfish Saul could have used David to make himself look good. A well led military would have been a glorious bolster to Israel's ability to thrive and succeed. The king takes the credit for the success and glory of the nation. Instead Saul wastes his energy, resources, and time hunting down and trying to kill someone who might have made a powerful and incredibly useful ally. Saul's counterpart in the story, David, is also his counterpart in how to handle past and present to craft a better future. David was far from perfect. He committed adultery and murder. He was not the greatest father around. As a warrior and military man he had a lot of blood on his hands, which was why God didn't allow him to build the temple. Yet he was considered a man after God's heart and one of the greatest if not the greatest king in Israel's history. A lot of that has to do with his ability to manage what Saul could not.

One of David's greatest qualities in this regard is in his refusal to lay a hand on Saul. Saul is chasing him all over the place trying to kill him. Saul had fallen out of favor with God and been rejected as king. David had already been anointed the next king of Israel. No one would have faulted him for taking Saul out. And it's not as if David didn't have opportunity to do so. Once Saul went in to go to the bathroom in a cave where David was hiding. He didn't realize David was close by. So close that David cut off a piece of Saul's clothing and went to the mouth of the cave after Saul had exited. He produced the piece of cloth and demonstrated that he has no intention of killing Saul. When asked why he would do such a thing David famously replied that he would not "stretch out my hand against God's anointed."

Think about what that kind of attitude requires. Time after time this man had tried to kill him. His best friend was Saul's son. Saul's hate and anger had to have made that friendship difficult. Yet David was able to let all of that go and spare Saul's life. Even proclaim that not only did he spare it once, but had no intent on ever taking it. This is a rare letting go of past offenses to make what he believed was a faithful choice in the moment. How he managed his past affected his faithfulness in the present and would write a future and legacy that even today is renowned.

The story we heard this morning is another example of handling the past in a way that affects the present and paves the way for a more solid future. The punishment for his sin with Bathsheba and her husband Uriah was that the child born out of their affair would die. As the child became sicker and sicker David fasted, prayed continually, and physically, mentally, and emotionally I think we can say was in rough shape. His attendants and such were concerned for his well being because he was taking such poor care of himself. This to the point that when the child did eventually die they were concerned for how much worse David would become.

To their surprise David's reaction was exactly opposite their fear. He got up, ate something, and got back to life. His fasting and deprivation were in the hopes that he might persuade God to spare his child. He accepted God's decision to maintain the punishment and when it was fulfilled what he had been doing served no further purpose. This isn't fickleness on David's part, it is faith that had to come from something deep within for him to manage his past so he could choose wisely in the present.

David in this instance didn't blame Bathsheba for "tempting him". He didn't blame Nathan the prophet because he was the bearer of bad news. He didn't rail against God as unjust and unfair. The only way for David to have acted as he did was to have owned his mistakes. He was called out, and forced to confront what he had done. In owning his past, he was able to accept that a consequence was merited. The blame for the consequence fell on his shoulders and his alone. So when the consequence was meted out, following it he was able to both accept it, and move forward.

David would continue to make mistakes and bad choices, just as we all do. The difference between a David and a Saul was in how the mistakes and choices were handled. The difference was in where their focus was and where they allowed their hearts to go. One went bitter, the other went towards God. One held on to the bad, the other let it go and moved forward. One became the king God rejected, the other the king after God's own heart.

This is the question before all of us heading into 2023. Will we head in like a Saul or a David? Do we hang on to the offenses and bitter of 2022 and move into the new year with a weight around us that will hold us back, or do we let go and open our hearts to whatever good is awaiting us and 2022 becomes a springboard? Moving like a David opens our hearts, minds, and spirits to see circumstances clearly. In turn the choices we make have a much greater chance of being faithful and correct. 2023 will be built one decision at a time. As those decisions are made Godly and faithful, the

year propels itself in success and a better way of being on its own. This doesn't mean all will be perfect, but it does mean that no matter what comes we might be able to face it with a perfect peace and integrity that comes from hanging on to God and goodness while we let go of bitterness and offense.

BIBLE STUDY Romans 6

Romans 6 continues to exhibit Paul's pattern of writing with the "what then?" pattern. He's asking these rhetorical questions about if something makes one better, better off, or worse. Over and over the answer seems to be "if you're thinking this NO!" He wants to squash what for him are absurd rationalizations and excuses for bad behavior and falling away from God's design. Here he launches into a very direct discussion of the nature of sin and righteousness, and our relationship to Christ through all of it.

If we're dead to sin how can we live in it? This is an interesting question. The perfect answer is that we can't live in sin. The honest answer is that we still do even if we're in Christ. His point isn't that we are perfect, it's a matter of focus and commitment. Of course we all still sin, but we strive to not live in it habitually. We make mistakes, but we try to not make a habit of making mistakes.

Then the passage turns to equating our own baptism with the death of Jesus. We need to be careful how we unpack this. To someone who isn't familiar with our language and the overarching message of scripture this could sound a bit terrifying. Jesus' death was an ugly crucifixion. Is this what we should anticipate? Of course the answer is no. So we need to see these next verses as a whole and a metaphor for us to understand faith.

The simple version is that Jesus was the sacrifice to conquer sin. When we die to ourselves, to our nature to defy God, we too are dying to that sinful part of ourselves. At least we are genuinely trying to. Often we die to sin one or two sins at a time. It's a lifelong journey. Jesus was resurrected a new, glorious creation. One on whom death would never have a hold. We too are called to be reborn from our sin a new creation on which death (sin) will never have a hold. Don't miss this, the connection between sin and death for Paul is very powerful and clear. It involves both the physical and spiritual death and life as well as a more practical yet metaphorical death and life in the here and now.

"Because anyone who has died is free from sin" is a dually significant statement. The first is that when we die physically of course we can't sin because we're dead. But it's more than that. If we reside in heaven we can't sin because there is no temptation. Temptation so often revolves around meeting needs we have because we are incomplete. People, things, experiences, all of it are part of finding wholeness in this broken world. It's why we can't conceive of heaven apart from certain people or things. But we need to remember that heaven is perfection. There are no wants or needs because God has filled them all. Therefore there is no temptation and relationships will look very different, because while relationships are very God, they don't serve the same purpose in a place where need doesn't exist. The second is practically that to be in Christ and relinquish our slavery to sin, to die to it, is to be free from it. In its place we trust that hope and righteousness will reign.

In linking our baptism with the death of Christ, Paul sets up for us to have another awesome and joyful expectation. To be united with Him in death means we are also united in life. In other words if He died to sin and we die to sin, then if He was raised to eternal life then we will be raised to eternal life.

The next section sets up Paul's use of slavery and obedience as a worldly example of who and what we belong to.

This sense of sin "reigning" is to point us to the issue of mastery. Jesus Himself said we can't serve two masters because we'll love one and hate the other. Paul echoes this here. Whatever we give ourselves to controls us. If it's sin, sin controls, if righteousness, righteousness controls. This can be any behavior, material, person, substance, deity, whatever. Where is my heart? The answer to this question tells us much about our relationship and commitment to God. Sadly too often little thought is given to this notion and we follow along blindly for one reason or another.

This is where the insult of being a "sheep" loses its power. In the light of Paul's senses, we are all sheep. The question isn't if we're sheep but rather who happens to be our shepherd.

The antidote to offering ourselves to sin is to offer ourselves to God. We give ourselves over for the sake of being used for God's purposes. Once again, this is a conscious choice. It is also the grateful response to Jesus' work on the cross. It's not some contractual obligation. It is an honest responding to the grace of God revealed in Christ. Since we've been redeemed, and no longer are shackled by sin we can celebrate by pushing forward and giving the grace of God to others. Especially giving grace to those who are different and with whom we disagree.

As this segment of the chapter closes we see a marvelous contrast between the Law and grace. The covenant of the law isn't horrible because it points out sin. It's inferior to the covenant of grace because while it can identify it, it can't defeat it. Grace, through the Spirit, teaches us right from wrong, can identify sin, but most significantly can overcome and conquer it.

Paul then uses the full blown sense of slavery to make his point. We choose whom we will serve. Whomever or whatever we choose has the issue of becoming an exclusive gig. In other words for us to serve sin is to cut righteousness loose.

On the other hand, the reverse is also true. To choose to serve righteousness is to cut sin loose. For those who wholeheartedly offered themselves up to the power of sin, the instruction is issued to switch masters and offer up to righteousness with the same passion and intent.

An interesting insert here is Paul acknowledging that they have given themselves over to a correct teaching about Jesus. One of the things in Paul's larger body of writing that we see often is speaking against false teachers. Particularly in communities he himself had started that had gone down a different road, he reminds them that at first they had it correct when they believed the gospel offered by himself. When they accepted the twist on it they accepted a lie and whatever consequences would go along with that lie. Here at the moment they have believed correctly. In acknowledging this he is also telling them to not deviate from that message.

I love his question about what they got out of doing all those things they now know to be wrong. They got nothing out of it other than death. It's a sarcastic question not unlike a parent looking at a child who went off against good advice and had a bad outcome. "How did that work out for you?" is often the question to get the child to think about action and consequence. That Paul uses that device here is a comfort. Too often we put the authors of scripture on a pedestal as if they haven't any all too human traits. They are only these perfect vehicles of God. But they all had the same quirks we do. They laughed and cried. They were serious and sarcastic. Reading this correctly into the text doesn't do anything but remind us that God's word is passed by ordinary men and women, and that we have the hope to be used of God just as they were.

As the chapter winds down, Paul is bending towards the positive that life overcomes death. Going further, good overcomes evil, light overcomes dark, love overcomes hate. In the end there isn't even a question. The positive is the powerful.

When we talk about death, it's important to look beyond just the physical. Yes, the physical death gives way to eternal life and that life without the burden of sin, pain, sorrow, etc. But there is another death that is wise to look at when we talk about life overcoming it. Death comes in many forms when we allow ourselves to see it in a metaphorical sense. Even in this chapter as Paul talks about our metaphorical dying alongside Christ there is this reality.

"The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Of course there is the natural, physical death. But there is another death that is critical. When we carve sin out of our life, that is a death as well. Sin that has become habit and routine often is sin that has become a companion or even family member. We are tied to our actions, our values, our experiences whether good or bad. Depending on how much space they have taken up in our heart depends on how great the loss is when they are gone. When something dies, even a bad something, there is loss. In that loss there is grief and mourning.

This is natural. It also has its pitfalls. If we focus on the loss of sin, we get into the trap Paul has wanted us to avoid all along. The more we focus on something, the more likely we are to do what we are focusing on, even if that thing is sinful or problematic. Staying centered on sin makes us more prone to repeat that same sin.

What if we pay attention to this message? Death gives way to life. Life overcomes death. Even in loss, particularly if we recognize that loss to actually be a good thing, we can find new life. It may take patience, time, and discipline, but it is there. The life overcomes death. The new thing that God has in store to replace or overtake the sin we've carved out has a greater place in our lives than the sin ever did. So we look for the life. We look for the good to come. We look for the bright spot. In the doing we guard ourselves against being once again overtaken by sin and reviving the very thing we'd put to death.

As Paul is moving through this portion of the letter we see the more positive, softer side to the beginning where he seemed to be railing against the common reality that both Jew and Gentile alike sin. Now he speaks of their common solution in Christ. He reminds them that though there is death there is also wonderful, beautiful life. All that needs to be done is accept it. And once we genuinely accept it, our earthly lives will never be the same. We can focus on living life here as God intended it without concern for eternity. Because if we accept and honor God in this life, not only with this life be full and rich but eternity will take care of itself.