

Marion weekly update
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

JANUARY 15, 2023

SERMON January 8, 'As God Sees' Galatians 3:23-29, Romans 2:21-26

This week we kind of continue on from last. We're not in a series per se, however last week, this week, and next week kind of stack neatly on each other. Last week we looked at some key points for how to move into the new year faithfully and with the best chance of making the most of whatever the year holds. Using Saul and David as models, on the positive side we saw the great benefits of being able to let go of past offenses, bitterness, and grudges. In so doing we reflect the nature of God and clear our hearts and minds for the best possibility to make decisions faithfully, correctly, and fruitfully.

This week we're going to consider another faithful attribute/skill that can aid us in letting go of things and having ourselves in a better head and heart space to not only move forward, but do so not only realizing we are often better working together but we can in fact work together well even if there are differences among us.

This skill is to see one another through the eyes of God.

Paul gives us a very basic sense of what this means and looks like. In Romans he dials in with a binary pair of Jew and Gentile. In Galatians he expands it out to slave and free, male and female. I don't believe it's going to far that we can then apply this sentiment to any set of opposites that we encounter in our lives and the world. Whether it be black and white, gay and straight, young and old, and any further divisions we can create. Which we do. Within these dualistic pairs, we see more and more lines that are drawn between people because of the nature of whatever is being considered. The point that Paul is getting at is that before God, we are all equal. There is no difference between us. That might sound a bit odd because just looking around the sanctuary we can see many differences among us. At the foundation, however, before God there are only two things that really bear out.

In Romans Paul goes to great lengths to help Jew and Gentile alike realize that neither has a leg up on the other. There is no superiority. Their world then isn't so different from ours today in certain regards. This is one of them. The desire to be better or "more" than someone else or another group of people is very real. It's also the root of far too much division and hate. So we go to the foundation, God.

First Paul talks about the negative great leveler of the playing field. Sin. We all sin. Yippee.... This reality, however, means that we've all got the same problem. We do what we're not supposed to do. We have attitudes and values that are not shared by God. In order to really grasp the fullness of this it's important to revisit what sin really is. It's not only severely bad behavior. When we look at it like this, we are prone to step away from grace and excuse circumstances that may be hurtful and damaging. Sin is simply missing the mark that God has set. Which is a broad realm of possibility.

Sin is more than a moral code. Yes, having a sense of right and wrong that aligns with God is certainly important. No question. But it's so much more than a code. Because as Paul points out, a moral code or law only has the power to point out sin, but not do much more. It is also behavior based, and we know that missing the mark starts in the heart which goes beyond the end result of the action to a host of other things like values, worth, priority, ambition, and so on.

For example, let's say I come across someone who is genuinely distraught. I feel moved to go to this person and seek to comfort or help them through their moment. This is all good, even likely inspired by the Holy Spirit. I begin to interact and as I hear the situation I formulate my opinion of what this person needs, and what I think they need to hear. But what if I'm wrong? What if what I think actually does more damage? What if I am actively pushing them further into the hole and further away from God? If I'd take the time to notice the reactions perhaps I'd see what is actually needed. Instead I dig in and focus on my perception. I am putting my assumptions over the other's genuine need and in the process both hurting the person I'm trying to help and missing the mark God has put before me. Even with the best of intentions, if I miss the mark I sin.

It's not only about stealing, murder, and so forth. It's about every moment where due to our own blindness, pride, or whatever we forsake the will of God for our own. Past, present, and future every human being has been afflicted by an inability to walk a perfect journey. As such none of us have any room to be hyper judgmental or wildly exclusive.

There is a second unifier and it's much more encouraging than the first. We are not only united and equal because we share a common problem. We share a common solution. The answer for all of us is Jesus and His work on the cross. The sin we can't conquer is destroyed by His sacrifice. Grace sufficient to forgive us all was poured out, and God imparts that grace as and to whom God wills. We are all equally flawed in our nature to sin, and equally blessed in the gift of grace offered to us all.

The love of God and desire to redeem each and every one of us is best shown in the story of the lost sheep. The shepherd doesn't just wave off the problem sheep as "too far gone" or beyond rescue. He doesn't just hang out with the flock of good sheep who behave because that's easier and more comfortable. He braves whatever wilderness and seeks out that lost sheep with the intention of bringing it back to the flock. If the shepherd is an image of Christ, there is no distance he won't go to redeem the lost. Because that lost sheep is loved just as much as the ones who have been found and not wandered away.

How does this shake out in practice and our attitude and spirit?

This is so necessary in a world like we live in. Fear is stoked relentlessly, pitting people against one another as enemies. We're made to feel like we have to choose sides and do so to an extreme. It becomes so easy to look at the differences among us. Easy to find our "tribes" and do so to the exclusion of those not in our "tribe."

The problem is that under Christ we're all the same tribe. The differences we use to divide don't exist for God. Those differences are simply the result of differing views on what is and is not correct. If we are people of faith our priority should be what is and is not correct before God. In other words, we disagree on what is and isn't sin. Yet the irony is that even if we disagree with what someone else considers sin, none of us are guilt free from committing it ourselves.

To see one another through God's eyes is simple to say but not so easy to do. God sees us for all that we are, including our sin, and loves us anyway. God desires to bridge the gap between us and God so that there can be relationship. The vehicle for this is grace. Not just any grace but a grace that transforms us. A grace that when we receive it opens up our hearts to be able to love in return more boldly and unconditionally. It doesn't look for the reason to push away or kick to the curb. It looks for the way to invite, draw near, and find relationship together.

God's purpose is never to pull us apart. It's to draw us together.