

SEPT 15, 2024

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Sept 8 sermon— ‘Heroes and Villains : What About You?’ Matthew 7:21-24, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

This is our actual last week in our Heroes and Villains series. Last week we focused on the One who should be the final pinnacle figure in the series as we end on a hero. This week we ask the important question for the here and now of today.

It's the “so what?” question. I hope in each message so far you've had at the end an invitation to what the message means for us in action here and now. In every message that is the question. “So I've heard all of this, so what? What does it mean to me?”

I've met and had conversation even very recently with people who have literally said that they weren't looking to hear preaching that applied scripture to here and now action. What they wanted was just preaching that informed them about the nature of God and the Bible. The problem with that, as we'll soon see, is that this thinking is directly opposed to Jesus' sense of what faith is to be about.

If all I do is build up my sense of how great God is, how precious redemption is, and how necessary a connection to the Spirit is, but there is no sense that all of this pushes us to impact the world around us, what good is it? In a faith tradition that is closed it doesn't matter. In a faith that is missionary, meaning intended to spread and span the globe, it matters an awful lot.

The big question at the end of this kind of series is the title of this sermon, and it points not just outward from the preacher but right at the preacher himself. What about you? What about me?

One of our scriptures can be confusing and potentially disheartening. It's the passage at the end of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says that there are people who will work incredible miracles in His name and be denied salvation. There are, and should be questions here. How can this be that those doing seemingly His work be denied? How can those who are denied have been given the power to do such miracles? Today we'll tackle the one that is most prevalently answered in the gospels, they can be denied.

It goes to the farewell discourse in John where Jesus is giving the disciples marching orders for when He is gone. This passage in Matthew gives much further teeth to what He says to them. He tells them that the world will know we love Him by how we love one another. He tells them that the world will know we belong to Him by how we obey His instructions. This is the command that informs us today. Too often we separate this message about who will be denied from the parable of the wise man who built his house on the solid rock. They are connected. Some translations before the following place the word “Therefore”. The verse is 24 connecting the parable and the statement. “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The sense here is that genuinely following Jesus means that we will listen to everything that's come before in the sermon and cultivate a life around it. This is the answer to the question of how people can do amazing things in His name and still not be right in their soul.

Let this sink in in a world of glitz, flash, and popularity. Just because someone has a huge platform and a lot of press doesn't mean they are on point with Christ in the fullness of what it means to follow Him. If we follow that message of just acknowledging how great God is without acting on it in truth and real practice we risk falling into this group Jesus is speaking to. Fortunately we have His words of instruction to adhere to.

SO, if we want to be a hero in the sense that Jesus is the hero of heroes what does that look like? We talked about His ultimate act of heroism redeeming all creation. That was a one and done deal. We can't do that. Does that mean we can't live a Christ like heroic life? Of course not. We've established that His heroism isn't limited to the cross. It extends to His entire ministry standing for the grace and mercy of God against the condemning nature of the religious folks who thrived on judgement and condemnation.

The Sermon on the Mount is a crash course. So what does that kind of life look like?

Who is blessed?

"Blessed are the poor in spirit,

4 "Blessed are those who mourn,

5 "Blessed are the meek

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

7 "Blessed are the merciful

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers

10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake

11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Notice in here that the aggressors, the offensive, the divisive, and the self-absorbed aren't mentioned. When we talk about the church being counter culture this is a big part of it. Think about the culture around us today. The Beatitudes are counter culture. Sadly the culture that cuts against them in too many places had infiltrated the church.

We are to take these Christian values and use them to season the world, not hide them away.

We recognize that the condition of the heart is equal to action and speech. Anger and incorrectly directed desire just waiting for an opportunity to jump are just as problematic as jumping. Watch the heart.

Take commitments and our word seriously. Have integrity and be trustworthy making word and deed congruent.

Love everyone even, perhaps especially our enemies. This sets us apart from the world. Even if someone makes a request out of malice, respond by doing more than expected.

Give generously to those in need. Pray to God earnestly. Fasting is a good discipline. Do them quietly rather than looking for accolades. Pray simply, God knows what we need.

If we want to be forgiven, make sure to forgive freely. Otherwise we won't be.

Put priority on God's desires, not the world's. Material wealth fades while heavenly wealth endures forever.

Be careful as to what we allow to influence us. If we already know the condition of the heart equates to action and words, then what guides our heart speaks to our true loyalty. Is it to God big "G" or some god little "g" that we put in the true God's place?

Focus on taking care of today. Wringing hands about tomorrow doesn't do any good.

Judge others with grace because God will turn our degree of harshness back on us when we ourselves are judged by God. So worry about our own sin first rather than someone else's.

Ask God for what we need. God will answer. What the answer will be we don't know but an answer will come.

Treat others the way we want to be treated.

The Sermon ends with warnings.

Stay focused because the life of faith isn't easy.

Be mindful who we listen to and follow. What someone produces tells the tale of their heart. And it's not always super clear when there is malintent because the best wolves know how to blend in in plain sight.

Have a clear impression of ourselves. Just because we claim to follow God doesn't mean that God agrees, even if we do some things in God's name.

Be more than someone who just hears the words of Jesus. Obey them.

This is the key to being a hero. Following the words of Jesus. Reflect on the Sermon on the Mount. Re-read it. Hold up the world we live in to its standard and ask if the world meets the standard. If not, how far a cry from Jesus does the world fall?

When we look in the mirror do we make excuses for which aspects of Jesus' words we don't follow? Do we celebrate the places in our lives where Jesus' words are lived out and working in the world around us?

At the end of the day the question before all of us is whose hero we want to be. The hero of our friends? The hero of our family? The hero in the workplace? Or do we want to be the hero that God calls each of us to be, living in a fashion radically removed from the harshness, hate, and pride of the world around us?

Jesus was the hero of heroes. He began the cosmic clean up of creation in His life and ministry. He brought others alongside Him to carry that mission on when we returned heavenward and homebound. He called them to follow in His heroic footsteps.

We are included in that number. We are called likewise to be heroes to continue transforming the world into the Kingdom of God. It's a risky endeavor. Not one of Jesus' disciples made it through their work unscathed. They did it anyway.

Take heart that when the world turns on us, and in that I include others who claim to follow Jesus, because we follow the genuine Jesus of the gospels, the one who preached this Sermon on the Mount, we are in good company. The company of true heroes. The company of God's heroes.

BIBLE STUDY

Chapters 21 and 22 of 1 Samuel don't necessarily have a lot of major theological punch. What these chapters serve to do is give us a much more significant picture of how the relationship between Saul and David continues to devolve, and makes a stark comparison between these two men and how they are viewed by the people around them.

David is on the run after parting ways with Jonathan. Saul is bent on killing David. Trying to find safety David's first stop is the priestly city of Nob where he finds Ahimelech, who is a priest within the family of Eli. His father Ahitub is Eli's grandson.

That Ahimelech doesn't know what's going on with David being there and that David's lie works tells us that the feud between David and Saul isn't necessarily widespread in Israel. The priest is confused that David is alone if he's on some mission from Saul, but David's reputation precedes him and help is offered.

Unsurprisingly and perhaps necessarily David is willing to lie to get what he needs to survive. Later in this chapter we see a different kind of lie that serves his purposes. King Achish is fearful of David, a man who has a reputation for victory and military might. How to disarm a suspicious king? Pretend to be mad. David feigns insanity so as not to be potentially harmed by Achish out of fear.

Ahimelech is willing to help out and gives David food and a weapon that David is responsible for procuring to begin with, the sword of Goliath. Again, David's reputation is strong. He is seen as an honorable and honored man within Saul's kingdom. The priest simply sees that David and his "men" have met the purity expectation to be able to receive the holy "bread of Presence." This was twelve loaves of bread presented each Sabbath intended to be eaten by the priests. David is given the privilege of eating it here as well. The sword of Goliath certainly represents that David's past victories hold sway even in this moment. Not only is it past, but the offering in the present and the sense that David is now armed to move into the future tells us that David is a man of destiny.

Theologically we cast forward to Jesus who cites this moment when His disciples and Himself are pulled up for picking grain on the Sabbath. The point? Sabbath and something as mundane as bread are intended to serve the person, not the person to serve the occasion. Even in the eyes of Jesus, David hasn't done anything wrong in eating the bread, nor has Ahimelech in offering it to him, at least according to Christ hundreds of years later.

Chapter 22 is a major contrast between Saul and David.

At this point David being on the run is clearly becoming known. He hides in a cave and begins seeking kings and allies to protect his family. Saul's anger is so great that it must be a threat to those David loves, and so he finds people to watch over them.

Men who have been disaffected by their circumstances rally around him. We are told that David becomes their “captain”. He is their leader. Even on the run David quickly begins amassing his force of men.

Finally, he has the prophet Gad come alongside him. Saul has some time ago alienated the prophets, chief among the Samuel. He is no longer consulting them in any faithful way. David is different. He regards and reveres God, and the prophet comes to him. Saul has been disregarded by the prophets and now David has been embraced.

David is being elevated even though his is in disfavor in the kingdom and hunted by the king.

Saul on the other hand is a different story. He is surrounded by his own tribe, Benjamin. Paranoia begins to take root. All he can do is point the finger at those around him, accusing them of not informing him of “conspiracies” that they likely had no knowledge of to begin with.

Who emerges here? Doeg the Edomite. The Edomites were enemies of Israel yet Saul is employing them. Doeg was chief shepherd, and apparently in charge of some of Saul’s servants. Saul has looked now at his own people as enemies and made his enemy his friend.

Doeg informs that David has been to see Ahimelech. Saul jumps to Nob now accusing the priests of being against him for aiding David. Ahimelech gives an airtight defense of his actions. He knew nothing, David’s reputation demanded all that was done for him, there was no wrongdoing. Saul has descended to a point of madness where reason doesn’t matter. He orders the death of not only Ahimelech, but also all the priests in the town. Not merely this, but we find that even the women, children, and livestock are struck down as well.

Something telling happens, underscoring Saul’s deterioration as David elevates. When he orders Israelites to cut down the priests they refuse. A direct order from the king is disobeyed. What does this say? Their allegiance is to God, not Saul. Unspoken? They will follow God’s king ultimately. God’s king is David.

Who does Saul turn to? Rather than turn to God and see if this is truly the correct action he pursues his mad instincts and goes to the one who is not an Israelite and therefore likely has no regard for the sanctity of the priesthood. He turns to Doeg who carries out Saul’s bloody order.

In this moment the prophecy against Eli’s house is fulfilled. They are cut down as told in the early portion of this book. One, Abiathar, escapes and finds David for refuge.

The responses of David and Saul couldn’t be more different. Saul embraces his paranoia and commits unspeakable acts. He is losing credibility in the sight of the people. He is being disobeyed by his own men. David on the other hand tries to conduct himself with some sense of decorum. People are now coming to him including the prophets. Moreover while Saul acts the villain, David acts the king.

When Abiathar comes to him David is the image of grace and humility. He admits that seeing Doeg at Nob he knew Doeg would rat him out. He takes responsibility for the deaths of the priests and offers Abiathar protection. David is showing the mettle of what kings are made of.

Something to consider as we look at this story on one hand is lamentable. Too many times there are leaders who claim to follow God yet fall into the same trap as Saul. Power goes to their head. They will abandon the good sense and conscience that allows them to both rule well and please God. Over time what develops can only be called madness when held up against the expectations of Christ. They ally with enemies of the good trying to accomplish personal gain. It doesn’t go well for their subjects or ultimately themselves.

On the other hand we see David. This is the essence of letting your reputation speak for itself and refusing to compromise even when the powers that be are set against you. David could have been worried about Saul running down his reputation and taken the expedient route of trying to kill Saul in response. He does not. He simply moves, runs, and tries to conduct himself as he sees fit regardless of Saul’s actions and intentions.

The result of this is that over time people see things for what they are. They are seeing Saul for his madness and David for his kingliness. It will take much longer for David to come to power, but for the

moment his tactic is worth it. It doesn't matter what someone else is doing. What matters is what David does, what we do. That speaks to our character.

This lesson is one often spoken of with a simple expression. "Live in such a way that if someone speaks ill of you no one will believe it."