

OCT 13, 2024

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

October 6 sermon—"God Is Everywhere" 1 Corinthians 7:7-9, Philippians 1:12-19

This week we are looking at something that hopefully can help us move forward with a sense of evangelism that is tuned in to the greater need of the word around us than is often addressed. To see this we look at two passages from Paul's letters likely written more than a decade apart. We will see a development in Paul's thinking that leads to a new understanding in the early church, and a more defined sense of spreading the word of God than might be initially thought from Philippians.

The earlier passage is from Corinthians. This is in Paul's chapter about marriage. He makes some very bold statements. As we entertain them, it is important to remember that truth, correctness, and intent if genuine is best understood if taken to an extreme degree. Absolute truth and correctness will still be true and correct even if we follow them out extremely. The fullness of an intentional statement can be best understood if taken to its utmost degree.

As Paul talks about marriage he makes an extreme wish. He wishes that everyone could be as he is... celibate. Understand this. He is wishing that if he could wave a wand and make everyone in existence as he is, they would not marry nor procreate. Why?

Does Paul want to see the human race end? That's the end game if everyone becomes celibate. No more physical intimacy no more babies.

Of course not. Nevertheless that is the ultimate end of his wish.

We can get a greater glimpse by his reasoning why. If someone marries the attention is divided between God and spouse and family. Full focus won't and can't be placed on only satisfying God because there are other responsibilities, Godly responsibilities, that need tending. This diminishes someone's capacity for ministry.

For Paul, this is problematic because in his understanding, AT THIS TIME, Jesus was returning in his lifetime. So maybe within 20 or 30 years? If this is the case the issue isn't making more people. It's bringing the people that already exist into relationship with Christ. So don't divide your attention. The human race is fine, it won't die out because time will come to an end before that can happen. In Thessalonians Paul talks about WE will be caught up in the air. This wasn't some future past tense that he is including himself in a group that will be there at the second coming after his own passing. He believed he would be there too.

As a freebee here, this passage also puts a damper on those who look at Genesis statement "be fruitful and multiply" as some sense that all people are intended to have children and that the primary intention for physical intimacy is child bearing. Here Paul's reasoning for people marrying is desire. If their physical desire is so intense that they can't be celibate it's better to marry so they can indulge that urge in Godly confines. It's not about children, it's about Paul's sense of what constitutes faithful and unfaithful physical intimacy.

The point here being that Paul's instruction is predicated on Jesus coming back in his own lifetime. Then we get to Philippians which seems like a bit of a different Paul. It seems in his earlier letters that he is very intent on the delivering of the gospel. He is harsh on those with malintent and delivering an alternate gospel to his own.

Here, imprisoned, Paul suddenly seems to give much more grace. As long as Jesus' message is being preached he's game. It doesn't matter why it's being preached, just that it is. He seems to have an opening of heart. Why?

Later in Paul's ministry it has to be evident that Jesus isn't coming back in his lifetime. Whether it's authorities closing in or simply older age, mortality is on the horizon more and more. And Jesus isn't showing back up. Something has to shift in his theology and ministry. He has to realize that the message needs to go beyond his own lifetime.

So he flexes a bit on who he may think is "eligible" to preach. In fact he even acknowledges that since his imprisonment others have "become more bold" in their preaching. He's had to rethink things a bit

in a new context.

The church has always had to do this. How do we adjust our grasp on faith as life and time unfolds? What new things come to light? Where have we been prove wrong in understanding? Where have we been proven right?

The early church had to come to grips with a lot of things. Jesus wasn't returning in their lifetime. As the grasp of how big the world was they had to also adjust their sense of how far God might reach. Their grasp was incredibly small. It was as big as their exploration could reach. North America wasn't even a consideration. Still, they had to reckon with God's presence and potential reach being far beyond their meager understanding of the world as the early Christians knew it in their own lifetime.

The idea of God's omnipresence is a long discussion scripturally, but we'll simplify it here. Let's simply take the statement that "no one can claim Jesus is Lord apart from the Holy Spirit." It takes some math like equations but we can track it out. If God doesn't want anyone to perish, and that means coming to know Jesus...and the only way to know Jesus is by the Holy Spirit, then everyone is being touched by the Holy Spirit perpetually. And if the Holy Spirit IS God that means that God is continually touching the hearts of every person drawing them to Christ. And if people are everywhere that means the Holy Spirit is everywhere and so God is also everywhere.

This stands to reason. The problem then becomes when people get Paul's openness wrong. Yes, the Holy Spirit is present in every heart calling each of us to faith. The question then is what faith we are being called to.

His openness is about the why, not the how. Remember, this is the Paul who has been incredibly harsh and frustrated about people receiving a gospel other than the one he offered to them. Philippians doesn't temper THIS. It simply addresses motivation, not content.

If the content is the same no matter who is preaching then motivation might not be an issue. If that was the case in Paul's day this makes sense. Paul is realizing that Jesus isn't returning in his lifetime so as long as the message is going out with authenticity the intention isn't a consideration insofar as the spread of the gospel. But what happens when the intention twists the message?

This is where things have gone wrong through the ages. When the intention becomes control, power, greed, and so forth it has changed the message. It has shifted the gospel to meet the intention rather than the intention bowing to the genuineness of the gospel.

This happened as soon as Christianity became the state religion in the Roman Empire and it has had issues since. As the religion grew it grew hand in hand with political power and through those centuries the church became, in addition to many other things, a means to control people. Church officials became as much political appointees as they were faithful selections. Salvation was for sale in the form of indulgences. Purgatory was a means to raise money by buying a relative out of that "in between" space between heaven and hell. Fear was a means to control behavior and allegiances.

This was not different than the problem in Jesus' day when the Jewish religious higher ups were in Rome's pocket. Rome was worried about one simple thing, keeping people in line. Religion is a great way to do this. The only thing that changed was the label. Rather than the Jews being in lock step with the empire it was Christianity. And many horrible atrocities were committed in the name of Christ as a result. Think of the Crusades, the Inquisition, and even the blood spilt as a result of the Protestant Reformation.

In our own day we see religion being leveraged to control using several messages. It uses prosperity. It uses politics. It uses fear in the sense that it pushes that a strong faith avoids anything that would challenge it rather than the truth that a strong faith engages the challenge because it is secure enough to stand strong in the face of challenge and even welcomes it to correct any aspect of that faith that might be in error.

We literally have pastors preaching from the pulpit that to in politics to vote other than what they tell you to, you're headed to hell. Faith is used to manipulate social values, morality, and more. We have churches preaching prosperity where the average congregant drives a used car yet the pastor flies

around in a private jet. Social agendas get tied to faith. “Think this way or you’re not Christian”. The struggle is that we are tempted to hear these things and assume that if I disagree with someone then they are the culprits of using faith to further an unchristian agenda. This isn’t necessarily the case. If I’m wrong in my sensibility, I need those opposing voices to bring me closer to correctness. I can’t ignore those voices just because I don’t like them.

Intention matters now because it warps the presentation of the gospel. Jesus was a poor, humble, compassionate rabbi who took the side of those who were sick, desperate, and in need. He stood against the judgmental and self-righteous. His goal wasn’t power, it was persuading people to come to faith and faithfulness of their own accord.

We are in a tumultuous time right now where talking heads are a dime a dozen. So are opinions. So are lies and bad information. We need to remember two things that the early church had to contend with and so do we.

First, God is always knocking at the door of our heart. There isn’t anywhere we can go to get away from God’s love as it says in Romans. There isn’t anywhere we can go that the Holy Spirit isn’t beckoning us to come to Christ and live in faith and love.

Second, we need to be discerning. If faith is being used persuasively, ask the question. What is the agenda of the one sharing faith? What do they want? What is the INTENTION? Because if it is anything other than conveying the grace and love of Christ with the intent of bringing someone’s life closer to God red flags should pop up immediately. The notion today that intention doesn’t matter because it won’t affect how the gospel is presented is foolish. Intention colors everything.

I encourage you to ask the same of me. Each week I get up here and talk about God, Jesus, and how that looks in life. What do you perceive my intention to be? If you have questions I hope you’ll ask. I’d love to have the conversation.

Unfortunately the gospel in too many ways has become hijacked due to personal agendas. Don’t buy it. Listen to the Holy Spirit that is imminent in our hearts. If everything I hear supports my preconceived notions this isn’t a good thing. It means I think I’ve got it all figured out and am just listening to voices that tell me I’m right.

Life is a continual journey towards God and towards perfection. If nothing changes in my understanding I’m not on a journey. I’m stagnating.

Our role in the world is to bring the truth of Jesus. The full, genuine, Biblical truth even when it’s inconvenient. This is what it means to be the salt of the earth. Our saltiness is that we live and trust the authentic life of Christ to guide us. The light we shine is to live it regardless of what religious and/or non-religious people might say.

There is power in knowing that God is all around us and within us. There is power in trusting that the witness of Jesus Himself is worth imitating. It is this witness and presence that changed the world way back then. It is this witness and presence that will change the face of our world today. Be the presence that stands against the many false Christs that have become such a mainstay around us. The contrast for those who are truly seeking the Jesus of the gospels is compelling. And in that lies the influence to make this world more like the Kingdom of God.

BIBLE STUDY 1 Samuel 24

Chapter 24 is fairly brief, and unpacks a singular scene. The scene itself is loaded with character revelation. David is on the run and Saul has learned his location. Saul gathers a band of men to find and kill David. When they get where David is, Saul has to go to the bathroom and heads into the cave where David and his men are hiding. He is a sitting duck.

Rather than heed the urging of his men to kill Saul, David spares him. To demonstrate just how vulnerable Saul was David cuts off a piece of Saul’s robe. When Saul returns to his men David reveals himself. His words are telling and strong. Saul has a moment of clarity and confession and for the moment the two men part ways without further incident.

David's character is impressive here. Saul is his enemy. He himself has been anointed king of Israel. No one would blame him for ending his torment there and then. Yet he doesn't. His reason is that he will not put the Lord's anointed to harm. He won't be responsible for Saul's death.

This is peculiar as up to this point it seems that David would be in the right before both God and man to put Saul down. Several reasons may have held him back.

The first is that perhaps David genuinely had regard for Saul as the king anointed by God. No matter how Saul behaves as long as he is alive David will spare him. God has rejected Saul, but somehow David still embraces him as king and is trying still to end the feud between them.

Sneaking up to cut off the robe does more than one thing. It gives David an opportunity to stand up to Saul and call him out on his unfair treatment of David. Also, it avoids being seen as cowardly by his men. The enemy is in his sights, to stay hidden would smack of fear. By cutting off the robe David satisfies his own conscience to not kill Saul and also demonstrates he is not fearful. Certainly this is a story the men would tell for years down the road.

The other goal accomplished is that David secures credibility for when he does ultimately become king. It's one thing to ascend naturally as a result of events. It is another thing entirely to ascend by killing the existing king. Leaving Saul alone sets a tone for David's reign that he has a sense of honor about the office of the king.

I am reminded of a conversation with a secret service agent. I asked how they reconcile times they are charged with protecting someone they in actuality loathe. His response was that they don't see it as protecting a person. They see it as protecting the office of the president or otherwise and the person occupying that office is immaterial.

We could do with more of this sensibility today. Disagree all we like with whomever is in office. Take care how far we go to tear the one occupying it down. When we go to far it passes beyond someone else's personality and begins to erode the very systems of governance we cherish.

This incident has also given rise to an interesting sense of "not touching God's anointed." There are pastors who warn congregants to be careful about what they say about them. After all, the pastor is "God's anointed" and so to even verbally strike out against him/her is to court judgment from God.

There is much to be wary about here. Self proclaiming being "anointed" lacks credibility. Warning people to be cautious of criticism and disagreement because they would be attacking God's "anointed" is a not thinly veiled way of saying "do what I say or else" and attributing it all to God.

This sensibility was David's and David's alone regarding Saul. We should be wary of wrongly striking out at anyone, not just "God's anointed". To take David's words out of context and reapply them conveniently thousands of years later is disingenuous.

The faith of David and reliance on God is demonstrated well in his speech to Saul. He proclaims his innocence punctuated by sparing Saul in that very moment. He calls out that he has been wronged for no reason whatsoever. Most powerfully in sparing Saul David adds strength to his call on God to be the judge between them. It will not be David. God will decide and put the matter to rest.

In a rare moment, Saul acknowledges David's place before God. He confesses David's innocence and his own wrongdoing. He proclaims that David will be king. He asks David's mercy on his own family. How do we take this? How do we take this kind of confession in our own lives from someone who has wronged us, maybe severely so, time after time? There is no easy answer to this question.

On one hand we want to be forgiving. We want to believe the best in people. On the other hand we need to be wise and cautious. After episode after episode of murderous jealousy and rage, one simple confession prompted by an extreme wake up call that Saul was so close to losing his life doesn't erase all that came before.

Proving grounds are necessary. They also don't exclude forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn't mean setting ourselves up for one more possibility of being harmed.

Maybe in this case what we take is that whether it's for a long time or just the moment, take the win where we can get it. David has a little breathing room right now. Saul leaves him in peace and David

goes his way.

While we may not always see the fullness of an apology come to fruition, perhaps in the spirit of living for the moment we can thank God for glimpses of goodness and moments of reconciliation. Perhaps if we extend this grace to others, when we are in need of it others will extend it to us as well.