

OCT 20, 2024

# *Marion* weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

October 13 sermon—"Answers at the Ready" 1 Corinthians 7:7-9, Philippians 1:12-19

Last week we began looking at some ideas from the early church to help us ensure that as we strive to put Christ into the world we are avoiding the traps too many have fallen into. At the same time there is a wonderful hope that came from Jesus' delay in returning. Most of the early church believed He would return in their lifetime and were incorrect.

As the church moved forward it did so amidst an ever expanding understanding of just how big the world is. By necessity the understanding of the breadth of ministry and the endless reach of God's love had to expand as well. Knowing God's boundless love and desire for us is a wonderful hope to cling to.

At the same time the way the message was presented shifted many different times. While Paul in Philippians tells us that he was fine with Jesus being preached by whomever regardless of intention, as the church grew we learned that the intention does affect the message. History has shown us that the reason someone tells the story has a lot to do with how it is told. It will always be told to accomplish the intention.

So as we are told about faith and Christ, we should ask what the genuine intention is of the one speaking. When we are the one speaking we need to search our hearts to ensure that our intention is pure. That we are speaking for the purpose of sharing the genuine Christ of the gospels for the sake of the world.

In other words, as we cling to the love of God, the "why" we tell the story is incredibly important to share that love.

This week we are looking at the "how" we tell the story.

In Peter's letter he writes that everyone should be prepared to give the reason for the hope they profess. He also indicates that how that reason is offered must be done in reverence, gentleness, and confidence. The reason the delivery is important is that if anyone should run us down for our answer they themselves will be "put to shame" because nothing in the delivery or intention is deserving of a harsh response.

No matter how kindly the answer is given, though, there is still no guarantee there won't be some kind of backlash. In God's eyes it's far better to suffer that backlash for doing good than for doing wrong. If the "how" of our delivery is condescending, rude, harsh and so forth the message can be easily dismissed and folks might understand an aggressive reaction.

Think about Peter's day. Today we don't really have to fear in our country any harsh retribution for answering about our faith in gentleness and reverence. Back then there was genuine persecution. Depending on whom one was talking to confessing Jesus as LORD and King above Caesar was a punishable offense. If one were Jewish to profess Jesus as Christ to another Jew was something we see persecuted, particularly in the early chapters of Acts. There was potentially dire consequence for being a Christian.

This is why preparation was necessary. In a time when the pressure of very real consequences was on, it would be easy to cave in out of fear and deny one's faith. The decision of what to say and how to say it NEEDS to be made before the fact to be resolved to answer faithfully.

In our day people still feel pressure, which is why we are encouraged to have our personal statements of why we believe thought out and at the ready. It's a different pressure but pressure nonetheless. Recently in conversation and online a next level to this instruction by Peter has come up. This is apologetics. Apologetics is simply having reasoned out justification for something, in this case faith or a point of belief. Why do I believe what I do? What evidence is there for that belief? Is it more than "so and so told me so"?

It's more than knowing scripture, it is also understanding it in all of its culture, history, language, and so forth. Then forming a sense of what we really believe and being able to intelligently answer when

someone asks us honest questions.

This is all good and I believe necessary to have a faith that we own and not one that is just riding the coattails of someone else's thoughts on the matter. Faith should never be an autopilot mode where we don't have to think. It should be ever deepening.

One of the pitfalls of apologetics, however, is intention, the "why" as well as the delivery, or the "how". Too often the intention is to win the headbutting match between the apologist and the target of the apologist. The intention is victory and the delivery can be very much done with confidence but little gentleness or reverence.

Paul's example in Athens helps us grasp that going head to head with someone who doesn't share our faith and arguing scripture isn't always going to be effective, particularly in our present day environment.

Where Paul found his great successes was in the synagogues in a town where both Jews and Gentiles could be found. In Athens he tried his hand in the public square battling with other philosophers of the time and ultimately arguing likely before a judicial council at the Areopagus. His success there was much less than in the synagogue. Some believed. More either didn't or showed some fleeting curiosity it seems.

It is understood that when Paul writes to the Corinthians that the foolishness of man is wisdom to God and the foolishness of God is wisdom to man he was doing so considering his rough time in Athens. One of the key pieces that he had trouble selling was the idea of resurrection, and the sense that the creation could kill the Creator. To the Gentile the idea that any god could be so self-sacrificing and loving to people was ridiculous. Gods were selfish and often cruel, even taking joy in the suffering of humans. Even more ludicrous was the notion that the frail, weak human could somehow ever have the power to kill a god.

In the synagogues Paul had common scripture to converse about. They spoke the same language and were talking the same material. It was more about interpretation and understanding but there was at least the common understanding that the scriptures were genuine and authoritative.

Publicly in the secular sphere they had none of that. It's not unlike today trying to use scripture to convince someone who doesn't believe in it to begin with. Scaring someone with hell as a consequence for sin doesn't work if they don't believe in sin or hell. And many who don't believe know the Bible better than many if not most Christians. They've done their own homework and disagree for reasons they themselves have at the ready.

When we live in a time where this is the case, and we don't even have the common ground of scripture, how does our reason for our hope find a way to land meaningfully?

By remembering Peter's instruction about the HOW. We deliver our message blamelessly with gentleness and reverence.

We remember that the point isn't an argument, it's a conversation.

We remember to do unto others as we'd have them do unto us, the Golden Rule. What does that look like? When I ask myself that question in light of the Golden Rule some things come into clearer perspective.

I want the other person to hear what I have to say

I want them to understand where I'm coming from

I'd like to be able to share experiences that have convinced me of my faith

I'd like an honest chance to offer what I've learned that's persuaded me to a life of faith.

So according to the Golden Rule I also need to:

Hear what the other has to say

Understand where the other is coming from

Listen to the other's experiences that have led to their personal beliefs and values

Give the other an honest chance to offer what they have learned and persuaded them

This is where the honest connection comes that allows us to see one another and perhaps influence one another in profound and positive ways. If headbutting argument isn't persuasive, perhaps experiencing the love, grace, and mercy of Christ in a person is.

In listening to another we learn about their joys, pains, victories, failures, and passions. We find commonalities that lead to greater conversation and relationship. We give a reason to consider something they may never have considered before because we offer it in a way they may never have received it before. In gentleness and reverence.

Some time ago I preached a message about reshuffling the deck. There is less growing the actual Kingdom of God by adding new people to faith and more churches growing or shrinking simply because the same pool of believers is moving from one church to another.

Growing the Kingdom means reaching out to those who have rejected the message, never heard it, or don't fully grasp it. The manner in which we connect has everything to do with how the message is received. How we offer it affects how it lands.

Be bold in willingness to connect with the different because it's largely the different that we are called to reach with the love of Christ. Remember the Golden Rule. Offer your reason for hope in gentleness and reverence. Who knows what might happen? Make someone's day brighter? Maybe make a new friend? Maybe even bring someone into a heart and life transforming connection to God through Christ.

## BIBLE STUDY 1 Samuel 25

Chapter 25 we find a tragic moment, though it gets only a single verse's mention. Samuel has died. The great judge/prophet has passed on and as Israel mourns, David continues on the run from Saul.

What we see throughout this chapter is a lot of reaction and consequence. Shearing time for those with a lot of livestock was a profitable time. Knowing the wealth that goes along with the time typically there was celebration and people were quite happy. This was the case for Nabal.

As one might imagine, if this is a profitable time it's also a time when raiders might be looking to pick off some livestock if they can. Knowing this, David has his men protect Nabal's people as they go about their business. Nabal hasn't asked for the help, but David renders it anyway.

In our own way of thinking this might cause a little hiccup with what comes next. Though there was no apparent arrangement between he and Nabal, David sends some men to ask to share in the feast going on. When Nabal refuses, David loses his cool and becomes murderous.

Was this correct?

Of course the extreme reaction was not. Murdering men who had nothing to do with their master's bad manners isn't just in any fashion. This becomes evident when Abigail makes her appeal to David. On the other hand, if there was no agreement demanding reward for services not requested seems a bit unfair. It would be like someone mowing my grass without me asking then knocking at the door asking for \$50. Even if the work merited the wage, that there was no agreement prior and no request means that I'm not bound to anything.

Should I give something? Depends on whom you ask. I probably would do something out of gratitude, though not obligation. And this may be where the issue lies with David.

In a culture that was geared so fiercely towards hospitality, Nabal's reaction would be unacceptable. It's not merely the rejection but the way that rejection was offered. It was insulting, rude, and wildly ungrateful. While David's intended response was extreme and incorrect, his frustration and being offended makes perfect sense.

Gratitude is a commodity in rarer and rarer supply today. Showing it marks the character of the one who is thankful as a person of quality.

Nabal's attitude doesn't appear to be fleeting or unusual for his character. As the story unfolds we see that his very name means "fool" or "stupid". This name was fitting. His own men, even his own wife, behind his back reveal their opinion of him. It seems they all see him for what he is, and though they

have to work for him or be married to him they have little respect or regard for him.

Again, we see an action and consequence. Nabal's rash action and foolish ways bring about hardship on those around him. It's about to bring mass destruction on the people he relies on the most. Not unlike today, it was up to other people to clean up the mess he'd created. First one of the men has found out David intends to do them harm and tells Abigail. Then Abigail, clearly more savvy and crafty than her husband, devises a plan to save both David from himself as well as the men under Nabal from David.

We don't want to be Nabal. Understanding that our actions and words bring consequences far beyond ourselves is critical in any role or walk of life. Sparing unnecessary hardship for those around us frees everyone to put their energies in a continuously positive forward direction rather than trying to right unnecessary wrongs. When Abigail meets up with David and his men she comes prepared with gifts. Wonderful gifts. She wants to make amends for her husband. She also absolves all the men for any wrongdoing. Abigail says to lay the guilt on her, a woman, thereby freeing all the men.

She lavishes praise on David, recognizing him for who he is, "prince over Israel". She pronounces blessings on David and curses on his enemies, which we know includes Saul. Her husband is such an imbecile that she even wishes David's enemies be like him, stupid. Abigail appeals to David's self-interest in that she lets him know that to stay his hand will protect him from guilt over innocent blood shed. She gives him an honorable out from the vow of slaughter he had made.

David reacts with an enthusiastic blessing and recognition that he was about to do something wrong. He was about to bring a curse on his own head. Abigail has saved him from his temper and he is grateful. So far it seems that as he's been on the run, David has been able to not overreact and kill even when it might seem merited to others. She preserves this in him.

All of us need an Abigail. David was under tremendous stress and perhaps this is what caused his hot-headed response. Seeing clearly she comes in and does what is hospitably correct and in the doing brings clarity of mind to David. David even blesses the LORD whom he says sent her to him. Abigail is an instrument of God intended to keep David Godly. When we are ready to do something rash because of whatever reason, we do well to look for the instrument of God around us sent to help us see better and do better.

When David sends her on her way Abigail continues to demonstrate great wisdom. She waited until Nabal sobered up after a night of drinking to tell him what she'd done. Something inside Nabal seizes up. It says he "became like stone". What this means we're not certain however perhaps he recognized just how close his foolishness brought his household to ruin. 10 days later it says the LORD struck him dead. David again learns who is really fighting his battles.

What quickly follows is telling and politically wise.

David sends for this recent widow who gladly seems to become his wife. David must have seemed like quite a prize compared to Nabal. We find out the name and origin of another wife, Ahinoam. The political wisdom here is that both of these women were of some status in the tribe of Judah. Nabal was a Calebite, which was a reputable clan in that tribe. In marrying them he is solidifying his status in the tribe of Judah for when he becomes king.

Saul on the other hand has pawned off David's other wife, Michal, to another man. This indicates a little about the notion of marriage in that day and time. Polygamy wasn't uncommon, and apparently divorce was as simple as a father handing off his daughter to a different man if he's dissatisfied with her present one. For Saul this is likely, among other things, an act of pettiness. His hatred of David prohibits him from wanting David to be any part of his legacy and bloodline. So he takes Michal and gives her to another.

Actions have consequences. Not negotiating terms of service led to David being snubbed. Nabal's ignorance and insolence led to a potential slaughter. David's temper nearly resulted in heaping bloodguilt on his own head. Abigail's shrewdness saved many lives and David's honor. David's marriages intended to solidify him in the tribe.

It's always wise to think ahead. To not can cause a lot of trouble. To do so can bring a lot of peace and goodness.