

OCT 27, 2024

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

October 20 sermon—"Our Hope" Romans 8:19-25, 2 Peter 1:1-11

This week I want to begin by being forward with the intent of this series we're in right now. If you've noticed, it's geared very much outward to how we present the gospel in the world. The first week answered the issue of "why" we do it. In other words the intention for speaking Christ and why that intention matters. The second week we answered the question of "how" we are to do it because the method determines how well the message will be received.

Here is where every church right now is at. Every church, big or small is facing the reality of decline. What this means is that there is something wrong with how the gospel is being presented. Even megachurches are facing the same issue. As you've heard me say several times, much of Christianity isn't growing the overall number of Christians. It's just shuffling the existing ones from church to church.

So even if all of the existing Christians shuffle to the same church, in the long run if no new believers are added the church will fade away. And I don't believe any of us want that.

One of the signs that Christianity is struggling is that loud voices within parts of our tradition are desperately seeking the government to mandate Christianity be legislated. Oklahoma is perhaps the biggest case study in this. They have apparently legislated Bible teaching. But with what thought? Who will be teaching it? Do you want an atheist teaching Bible? Whose interpretation? There are dozens plus interpretations of scripture. Which scriptures? How thoroughly is it going to be taught? So many complain about indoctrination. What if the school decides to indoctrinate Christianity in a way that you don't agree with? The number of obvious holes in this is glaring and enormous. But what it signals is that the church isn't able to impact the world the way it's called to on its own. So it wants the government to step in and use its power to do the job.

Sorry, not sorry, this isn't Christ. Nowhere did Jesus indicate fusing with the Roman empire for the sake of His message. In fact He stood well outside of it to the point that the Roman empire executed Him.

So what do we do? That's going to be our journey over the next months together.

If we've tackled the why and the how, today we look at the what. What is the hope we proclaim? I had an idea of how to structure this all week until last night when I reread 2 Peter. We're going to break this down in a way that I hope reminds us of the infinite hope we have in God and Christ, and led by the Spirit.

4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

Our hope is that we serve a God that acknowledges we aren't perfect. We need an outside influence to help us do better. It doesn't mean we can't do better sometimes. We all can. It means that we need guidance to do better more often and have a goal to strive towards to do our best always.

God understands that there is temptation in the world and offers us something better in the example of Jesus. How do we participate in the Divine nature? By following Jesus. The Jesus of the gospels. You hear me say this often. Jesus of the Gospels. This is because too many follow the Jesus of an agenda of someone else. We need to get back to the Jesus of the Gospels.

5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.

Look at all of these things that Peter writes. They are not far off from Paul's fruits of the Spirit. Faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, and love. This is HOPE. Our hope comes in having a steadfast guide to what life looks like lived out in its fullness. All of this is about relationship, understanding, and that understanding lived out in relationship. Anything that is driving us to separate, hate, and exclude one another does not fit into this model.

Some might argue that knowledge pushes us to stay away from THOSE people, whomever that might be. I suggest that the next trait, self-control stands against that. Self-control suggests that I have the control to put aside my pettiness to accept the different. Accept the ones everyone else sets aside. To eat and drink with the sinner even as the religious look on scoffing and criticizing.

8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This verse puts the ones before in stark perspective. Our hope is that doing what's come before, living as Jesus suggests in the Sermon on the Mount, make us like Jesus. They make our very lives effective. Not our words, the fullness of our lives.

The incongruity of so many Christians today between word and deed is a cancer. Peter reminds us that having them in concert is a key part of our message being effective.

It is THE fruit that shows the world that we trust in our hope! We believe it to the place that we live it to the greatest degree. Those who the world dismisses we welcome because ALL are welcome into the arms of God through Christ.

If we look at the world, research, sociology, history, all of it we find that the traits Jesus exemplifies and Peter lifts up here we see that all of creation is better off when we live into them. The example of the Acts 2 church, doing all things together, loving one another, having all things in common so no one has need, all of this...if the world embodied it none of our problems would exist.

The Kingdom of God would reign here and now.

9 But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

This is the warning for those who don't live into this hope. Anyone who can't do this is lost. It doesn't matter what they say, what they profess as faith. They have forgotten themselves, forgotten their Redeemer, and forgotten their own sinfulness.

In this the ultimate hope seems to vanish according to the verses that follow. The hope that is so boldly proclaimed by those who have forgotten themselves they themselves will not be welcomed into.

10 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble,

Here is one of our most wonderful hopes in our lives. The next hope is something we wait for. According to our Romans passage we wait for it patiently. Patiently, but not idly.

We have the hope of a purpose greater than ourselves. We are part of something bigger. We have a calling.

This idea of calling is squirrely. Some come into it by faith, others come to faith through calling. This dual sense is part of the beauty of calling.

Calling is essentially the sense that all of us have an innate purpose. We have giftedness and the giftedness comes with intention.

Some find that without faith. They recognize where they are talented and live into it. There is fulfillment in this. Sometimes in the process they come to discover that there is a bigger power at work in their talent and purpose. It often takes inspiration from others to register but it guides towards the author of the fullness of a calling and can take that calling and make it bigger and greater.

It guides to a connection with the Holy Spirit Who has been calling all along.

The other side is that people of faith are searching their hearts for what the Spirit is saying. They find what they are gifted to do, live into it, and life becomes fuller and greater. They are already searching for the greater purpose and finding it is a tremendous joy.

No two callings are the same. All are equally important.

The hope here is that whatever our calling, the impact is beyond ourselves. No calling is selfish. It never focuses on self aggrandizement, amassment of selfish wealth, public image, or otherwise. It ALWAYS focuses on uplifting others and the greater good.

This is an amazing hope. It is the hope of being connected to all of creation, understanding that no

matter how insignificant we may feel, our presence matters. What we do makes the world better or worse. You can make a difference. And not just a temporary difference, a difference that brings the Kingdom of God to bear in all the world.

This hope of calling points us to the hope of community. Many of not most people can say they have community outside of church that fulfills them. That may be so. Yet there is a difference between community and community of faith.

Community of faith has a sense of more than self-interest. I can find lots of people who will support me in whatever I want to do. Whatever I want to do isn't necessarily correct. It doesn't uplift all of humanity. Which means whatever part of humanity I tear down is part of myself I tear down because I am part of humanity.

Faith has accountability that reigns us in to the fullness of Christ. Self-sacrificing, merciful, compassionate, loving grace that forsakes self for the better of all. In this we find satisfaction and peace that sustain us through our days in this world. In this we find HOPE.

11 and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I didn't save the best for last here, Peter did. The result of all of this is redemption. Our hope is that when this life passes away, it's not the end of life. Life extends eternally in peace and love in the presence of Almighty God. This is the hope that Romans says we await for patiently. Living for God today brings us into the arms of God eternally.

Too much Christianity relies on a statement of faith and then living life however believing that between confession of faith and death is the patience. The patience is also encompassed by living truly for Christ. James 2:22 says

22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.

Works complete faith. Which is why James also says that faith without works is dead.

What works are before us? Finding the best ways to reach out to the people the church rejects. Welcoming them as our own family as we welcome one another. That's the task before us. The hope in THIS is that the more we welcome those who have been pushed aside by the church the more we are like Christ. The more we journey alongside others who are simply striving to live this life to the fullest. The more we complete our faith, live into 2 Peter, occupy our patient time with Godly work, the less angst we feel from fighting the movement of the Spirit, and the more our eternity is secured as our faith is an active, transforming presence in the world.

BIBLE STUDY 1 Samuel 26

Chapter 26 is incredibly reminiscent of chapter 24. There is not a lot to expound upon further than we did in that write up, though there is a little gem to perhaps make us scratch our heads a bit.

Once again the Ziphites tattle on David's location to Saul. There will always be that person or group that's stirring things up. Remember when David saved the town of Keilah. It was revealed that when Saul was going to show up the town would have given David up to protect themselves. This makes a degree of sense. It's not active, but rather passive and regrettable. On the other hand the Ziphites are actively going to help Saul in his quest for David.

David sneaks into Saul's camp with his nephew Abishai and steals Saul's spear and water jug. He waves off Abishai from killing Saul then and there, doubling down on his statement that he "won't harm God's anointed", nor will he allow someone to harm Saul on his behalf.

This time when he calls Saul out for his unjust pursuit it's more assertive and aggressive. David calls out Abner who should have been in charge of protecting the king. Abner has failed in that task as David could easily have dispatched Saul at night. He literally says that Abner deserves to die for this mistake.

As in chapter 24 Saul seems to have a moment of clarity at the end of the engagement and they part peaceably. We'll see in chapter 27 that despite this second such engagement and Saul's seeming regret David isn't sold that Saul is done hounding him. Which leads us to that little gem.

David makes an odd statement that is curious. He claims that Saul is telling him to "go serve other

gods”, and he asks that his (David’s) blood not fall to the ground away from the presence of the Lord. Why would he make this kind of statement? Isn’t God everywhere? How could he be forced to worship another god? Where could his blood fall that God’s presence wouldn’t exist?

It could very well be that we miss that Israel at this point wasn’t a fully monotheistic people. A problem that plagues Israel through its history as a nation is idolatry. What this tells us is that Israel acknowledged that the gods of surrounding nations existed. When nations battled the outcome was often attributed to whose deity was the stronger.

When people went full on into idolatry it wasn’t that they were knowingly worshipping something new and nonexistent. They believed that god existed. This notion of a “contest of deities” makes sense when we read the passages where God is argued with and the plea for God to relent in punishment is because if God’s people are laid low it will damage and shame God’s reputation to the surrounding nations. Moses suggests this in Deuteronomy when he pleads for mercy for the people because those around them, if they are destroyed, will claim that God was unable to bring the people to the promised land. It would show God to be weak.

When the ten commandments are handed down in Exodus there is warning to stay away from fraternizing with other nations because they will be led to worship other gods. Even one of the commandments “have no other gods before me” acknowledges that the people understood that other nations had other gods and God was warning them to not place any of them higher than Godself.

Today we understand God’s being to be singular and these others to be false and nonexistent. We understand that commandment to be similar to Christ’s warning that we “can’t serve to masters because ‘you’ll hate one and love the other’”. The moment we try to double dip in worship one or the other deity will gain dominance. We understand it not to mean “you can have other gods just keep Me at the top”, but rather “I am the only true God so don’t fool with any of that other stuff worshipping ‘gods’ that don’t exist at all.”

At that time, the people of Israel saw the presence of other gods to be a very real thing. It was later as their story unfolds and circumstances change that a bigger understanding of God’s presence and that there truly is one and only one God really cements. Again, remember that all the way up until the exile idolatry was a very real problem for the kings and people of Israel.

It is suspected that part of the superstition around their sense that the other nations had very real gods was that each god had their own “territory”. So Israel’s God ruled over Israel while the Philistine god ruled over the Philistine territory. For David to be forced out of Israel by Saul who was chasing him meant he would be forced into the territory of another god. As we say “when in Rome do as the Romans” David is saying that when he’s forced into the land of the Philistines he is then forced to worship as the Philistines do. Should his blood be spilled there, it is spilled in the nation of another god, in other words apart from the presence of the Lord.

This might sound like hair splitting, however it’s important as we study to not just dismiss things that are awkward, confusing, or uncomfortable. Too often I hear statements like “well we’re not supposed to understand that” or “that doesn’t really matter.” Sometimes there are mental and scriptural gymnastics to try to make something make sense and often those gymnastics don’t hold up to critical thinking.

Tackling these little oddities and confusing statements are “gems” because many times they help us put the people, places, and events we’re reading about into a bigger context. We see that, as in this case, David’s words make sense not just given the historical digging but also fitting in with the rest of what unfolds in the scriptures regarding other nations and their gods.

Imprinting our beliefs today on ancient people, even in the Bible, may be convenient but it gets in the way of a fuller understanding of the scripture. It also cheats us out of appreciating and seeing the hand of God at work as the story of God, people, and how it all plays out in history unfolds and grows.

For me at least, grasping these kinds of nuances doesn’t erode faith it builds it. Rather than seeing this and thinking “oh no, God only reigns in one place on earth and if I’m not there I’m out of luck” it

points somewhere else. I see it as “I wish David had understand what we’ve come to know now. There is nowhere he could have ever gone where he couldn’t worship God. There is nowhere he could have ever been where God’s presence couldn’t be found.” We appreciate the gift we’ve been given as God has been not only further revealed but also more fully embraced.