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Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

October 27 sermon— “Why So Urgent?” Proverbs 16:1-7, John 14:23-27

The past weeks we've been considering some of the issues with the message of the gospel making the kind of difference we'd like to see in people's lives. Christianity is in decline, and the only way to right the ship is to be honest about where the problems lie. Doing so isn't being doom and gloom, rather it's reflecting on ourselves, our local church, and the church as a whole across the country and world. Our first week we considered the intention behind why the gospel is being shared. Through history and even today agendas like power, greed, politics, and control warp the gospel to suit the intention. Instead the intention must be hand in glove with the gospel itself. When this isn't the case it is no longer the saving gospel of Jesus no matter how many believe that it is. And today many can spot the phoniness of intention. So we search our own hearts when we speak faith into the world to ensure that our motives are correct before God.

The next message was about the “how” we present the message. Peter tells us to do it in gentleness, respect, and reverence. The WAY we speak the message has everything to do with how it will be received or if it will be received at all.

Last week, again from Peter, we looked at the “what”. What is the hope that we profess? We have the hope of redemption, the hope of calling, the hope of community, the hope of a God that loves us in our imperfection and offers us a living example in Christ of what a faithful life looks like. Peter even offers his own list of attributes that demonstrate genuineness of faith, knowing that living into such a life is the hope of the world.

This morning we are going to look into the question of why it's so urgent to make the changes that need to be made across the Christian faith now, not later.

For many the urgency is easily answered one of two ways. The church is shrinking and we need to bring more people in is one. Another is that we need to be out there saving souls.

Both of these are true, but if we focus on them the wrong way we will miss many of the reasons that the church is largely just shuffling existing believers from church to church rather than growing the actual number of believers.

To have urgency be fully about worrying that the church will die has liability to it. Another way of putting it is that the concern is survival. When we are in survival mode we don't always think clearly and can be tricked into expediency over quality.

Perhaps the best illustration I can think of is some advice I gave to a friend when he first was running a karate school. He was struggling and really needed to boost the student base. This was his livelihood and he had a family to support. I reminded him of one of the keys to not just getting but also retaining students.

The temptation when someone calls or comes in is to see them as a dollar sign, as a mark. Now the right sales pitch might bring them in at first, but if they aren't seen as a person with needs to be addressed and a relationship to be built their time in the program will likely be much shorter.

Whether it's a teacher seeking students or a congregation seeking new faces to come with us, seeing others and knowing them as a person, not just a target to be converted is critical. People are tired of being shined and then dismissed. Yes we are to bring people to Christ, but the community of faith is always to be a family affair. It's all about relationship and seeing each other for who we are. Coming alongside one another. All of us pitching in together to do the work of ministry.

Saving souls is also a very generic urgency. If it's based in much of the end times fervor it can put a rush on trying to pull in as many as possible. The most expedient, there's that same sense as when it's survival mode, is to scare folks. Where will you be when the rapture happens or Jesus comes back? The problem is that people have said this for 2000 years and so for most people that don't already believe that track record isn't compelling.

This can also cause people to be seen as marks or targets. Get them to say a prayer and move on to the next one. Jesus never said to just get people to say a prayer. He said to make disciples. Over and over he demonstrated and stated that true relationship with Him is demonstrated by living into His instructions and living lives of radical kindness, compassion, and love. This is His instructions in the gospel of John as He shares the night before His crucifixion with the disciples.

All of this takes time. It takes relationship. If we are rushing it so much is going to be missed. And we can be deluded into thinking that somehow we are doing the saving. All we are doing is introducing people to the One who redeems, and asking to walk with them in a mutual journey of transformation and becoming more like Christ.

So yes, we do need to grow the church. Yes, we do need to invite people into redemption. But there is another urgency to be a catalyst for both.

One of the great questions is “what are we being saved from?” The pat answer might be “sin” or “the penalty of sin”. The problem is what too many people see today when they look at the church. To demonstrate this I am going to share some incidents and comments the lions’ share of which occurred right here in our own back yard. In fact some of the incidents occurred within a mile or two of where we are right now this morning.

The example of the church has gone wayward. There is a true and emergent urgency for the church to demonstrate Christ authentically to the world.

First, a few stories from Hanover:

A New York raised pastor of Puerto Rican descent had a church in an area with a large Latino population. The congregation was persuaded to allow a Latino community center to use some of the building space. One day a spatula, a single spatula, came up missing. Automatically it was blamed on the Latinos because certainly the Smiths couldn’t have accidentally snagged it with their casserole dish at the potluck. A board meeting was held that was riddled with horrific, racist remarks and slurs in the very presence of the Puerto Rican pastor.

This same pastor visited a dying parishioner. As he was leaving he heard this individual tell their son “don’t let that foreigner bury me”.

An associate pastor of a UMC went to Gettysburg over the 4th weekend to visit the graves of family that had lived through that time. He was wearing a Black Lives Matter shirt. He was surrounded by a large group of angry people harassing and threatening him. He recorded the incident and he literally was trying to talk with them about his intentions but they weren’t having it. The park police had to escort him out of the mob for his own safety, even affirming him that he hadn’t done anything wrong. They just needed to get him to safety because he was in very real danger of harm. The church fired him.

Now for some close to home things.

First some LGBTQ situations:

Two children tried to get registered with a local Christian school. They were rejected because the parents were of the same gender.

A same gender couple attended worship and during the worship service they were publicly outed and shamed before the entire congregation.

Someone went to attend a community group offered by a church and as they inquired and their orientation came up the message was given that since the program was kind of peripheral and community based they could attend that but likely wouldn’t be welcomed into more of the really church oriented ministries.

A man was told that he himself was going to hell because his son was gay.

A man who had gone to seminary was literally kicked out of the church when he came out, and was abandoned by his entire compliment of “Christian” friends.

A church gave the very clear message that asking questions was forbidden and members were expected to blindly toe the line of the minister.

Science and honest research were demonized.

The gross misuse of church funds and the excessive guilt and push for money

Women being treated as 2nd class citizens

Churches feeling more like political machines where people are told how to vote than a place of welcome and gathering to hear the Word of God and seek Christ.

Signs that say “welcome” and when they came in it really meant “welcome so long as you’re just like us.”

Sharing honest stories of abuse and hurt just to be told to keep quiet and “suck it up”

The gross double speak of saying we’re not to condemn or judge only to say out of the same mouth incredibly judgmental and condemning things.

One of the great frustrations people share is that an honest question or need is offered and the response doesn’t address any of it from the person’s point of need, it’s just canned responses laced with meaningless religious jargon

All of these are honest reasons people have for avoiding church and it’s directly connected to their experiences with churches right here in our immediate area.

This is what the world around us is saying about the church:

The church has come to look more like the leaders shaming the woman caught in adultery and preparing to stone her than the Christ who stood with her and offered mercy.

The church looks more like the disciples holding the children away from Jesus than the Jesus who openly invites them to come to Him.

The church looks more like the priests hand in glove with the empire than like the Jesus who stood outside the empire and called those priests to account.

The church looks like it’s flipped the priority when asked to choose between worshipping God or money.

The church looks like it’s forgotten that there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female because all are alike under Christ.

This is the message we are hearing. The very world we often criticize for not living like Christ is having a harder and harder time taking us seriously or hearing our message because they are calling out where the church is missing the mark of the one we proclaim.

And I think many people really want Him.

This is our task To be the torchbearers that right the image of the church and show the world what the genuineness of Jesus not only sounds like, but looks and feels like. It isn’t an overnight endeavor. It is time consuming but it is honest and it is correct.

Proverbs says that those who live for God will make peace with our enemies. I see this today as the world that avoids the church will come to a new or renewed understanding of what Christianity looks like and may once again be compelled towards faith.

But also be ready. If there is peace with those who come around, there will be enemies made of those Christians who don’t like that we’re living into the fullness of Jesus. They will not like that we welcome and love the people that they don’t. They will not like seeing where they are off the mark shown out not just by those outside the church but by fellow Christians who have chosen to chart a course back to having Jesus truly at the center of all that we are and do.

There is an urgency that when we say everyone is welcome, everyone is the beloved of God, everyone is desired by Christ that everyone means EVERYONE.

That may take some adjustment. We have to be prepared to set aside our own issues, prejudices, and concern for what other people might think. We have to be bold enough to imitate the Jesus who didn’t care about those criticizing Him for whom He was spending His time with. He was simply dialed in on loving everyone who needed loved and guiding everyone looking for guidance.

It’s a learning curve for sure but it’s also the growing edge of faith. It’s the doorway to a greater

understanding of one another and experiencing the giftedness of God in ways we've never known because it will come through people we've never understood or shared company with. It is the gateway to the rich Kingdom of God where no one is excluded from the foot of the cross, the fellowship of faith, or the love of Jesus.

I would like to suggest that something that doesn't necessarily convey urgency is at the heart of meeting the urgent need for the church to course correct its message. And for those who are trying actively to make it happen to remember as well.

Peace.

Peace sometimes communicates complacency. It communicates ease because conflict isn't present. But this isn't the peace Jesus is talking about in John.

This is HIS peace. He doesn't give peace the way the world does. It's not an absence of contention. It's actually something that exists even when the world all around is in chaos and turmoil. The supernatural sense of it is that the peace is independent of external forces. It exists no matter what.

This peace comes from doing what we are called to do in Jesus' eyes. It comes from having that same resolve to do God's will in the world no matter what others might think of it, even other people who profess to believe in Christ. The peace exists because the inner conflict that comes from being at odds with God is gone. We no longer allow the world or other people in general to rule our attitudes, priorities, and experiences because in the end the most relevant one in our lives is God.

This is where the walls come down. This is where we find that authentic expression of Jesus that so many who take issue with the church today are seeking. This is how the peace of God reigns within us.

In a time when it seems so much is geared at stirring us up this peace of Christ is most urgently needed for our own well being. In a time when Christianity in too many places is missing the mark this peace is urgently needed so that we can live into His example with a contented heart and mind. It is this peace that lets us confidently b

e the bright and genuine light of Jesus in the world. And as this peace takes over the urgency of bringing new people to Christ and introducing them to the redeemer and lover of their souls becomes more real and more compelling.

BIBLE STUDY 1 Samuel 27

Up to this point it seems like David has a relatively steadfast faith that God will have his back. In chapter 27 we see that David's confidence is waning. As the reader we can see the ongoing continuing contrast between Saul's degrading character and David's steadfastness. David is likely not privy to such insight. Even though Saul has said he's done with chasing David that promise falls flat. David is convinced the Saul will kill him so he flees to Philistine and to King Achish.

He is banking that running outside of Israel will get Saul off his back. It works.

This is the same Achish whom he feigned madness. Perhaps at that time it was too soon in proximity to when David was a threat and pest to the Philistines and he was worried he'd be killed if Achish still saw him as a threat. Perhaps it was because he was largely alone. Regardless, time has passed and David now has a fighting force gathered behind him. He approaches Achish with confidence.

This chapter is filled with intrigue and scheming on David's part. There is also something lacking. Nowhere here does he consult God on his course of action. This is significant. There is rampant lying and bloodshed of people who haven't done anything to David. Keep in mind that action recorded doesn't mean action condoned, even by David.

He asks Achish for a town away from the royal city. Why? When we see what David is about to do we understand that it's because he has another agenda. He doesn't want Achish to know what he's up to. Achish grants David this request and gives him Ziklag. It's here that we see an example that demonstrates this history was written at a later date, not contemporaneously. There is the remark that Ziklag remains in the hands of the kings of Judah "to this day". This is a clear statement that Ziklag has been in the hands of these kings for some time and the detail explains how this Philistine city has been assimilated into Judah.

David embarks on a time of raiding. If we focus on the words of David as he relates who he has been raiding we miss the fullness of his scheme. David tells Achish he's been raiding Israelite peoples. These are the enemies of Philistine and so Achish would be glad for this. In truth David has been raiding the enemies of Israel, who may have been Achish's allies. David is further ingratiating himself to Israel all the while making the Philistines think he's been waging war on them.

The ugly of this is that in these raids he leaves no one alive. If he did they might tell Achish who David has really been raiding. And dead men tell no tales.

This would ruin David's plan to ingratiate himself while he's on the lam from Saul. David is doing what is expedient for his own survival. Unfortunately it comes at the cost of many lives and a lot of theft.

While he kills the people he keeps the livestock and items of value. It can be safely assumed that he shares some of his plunder with Achish. After all, it's a lot easier to look the other way when your wallet is getting fatter.

The bottom line is that David's ploy works. He is safe in the land of the Philistines. David's lies have been so successful that Achish assumes the Israelites now hate David. What that translates to is that David is no longer safe in his own land and his only refuge is to serve Achish.

Sometimes people, even our heroes of faith, engage in action that is wrong. The absence of David consulting God is glaring. He was going his own way and acting out of fear. The result is that he resorts to lying, thieving, and murder.

As we will see in the following chapter, what we are witnessing is that both David and Saul are desperate. David of the two is certainly more tethered to God. But both are struggling. This is how kingdoms end. When everyone involved is desperate.

In the end we hope that when we are in dire straights we will choose better. Whatever is expedient, if it isn't correct before God we find another way. In the end, all we have is our own conscience. What we choose determines whether we sleep well at night. What we choose determines whether our lives reveal a redeemed life before God or not.