

Nov 17, 2024

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

November 10 sermon— “Making It Personal”

As we continue our theme of putting the Word of God into the world we are going to shift gears a little bit. Much of what we've considered so far has been largely focused on a corporate sensibility. What do we focus on as a universal whole be it local congregation or Christianity in its entirety. We've looked at the importance of intention, why we are putting God's Word into the world. The how we do it because presentation matters. The core of the what, the hope we have in Christ. We've looked at barriers the church faces to people being able or even willing to hear our message. We began branching out last week as we talked through the sense of harvest and reaping.

Harvest has both the individual and corporate sense to it. The harvest of faith we produce in our lives leads to reaping salvation and at the same time also provides the witness to inspire those in the world, the harvest field around us, to consider Christ and faith for themselves.

One of the points of our message last week was that as individuals in order to reap the harvest we have to go into the fields. For some this is fearful because there is concern that exposing ourselves to the world will as James puts it make us “friends of the world”. We saw some encouragement the this doesn't mean we don't associate with worldly people. Paul himself tells us that while we aren't to associate with the immoral who consider themselves believers we have to associate with the immoral who are not in the church. There's no way to avoid it unless we withdraw from the world entirely.

Jesus prayed that He had not desire for us to come out of the world but that God would protect us as we walk through it. Scripture tells us to be in the world but not of it.

We found that being friends with the world is all about values and ideals. James in chapter 3 and 4 shares this describing values of jealousy, greed, arrogance, and selfish desire. These lead to the immorality that demonstrates we are friends with the world. On the other hand if we have our perspectives in order this is no concern at all. We can stand firm in our convictions as we engage the world and be the salt and light the world needs.

Today I believe we will look at something that bolsters this confidence that we don't have to be afraid of the world. We have a kind of armor that if we cultivate it both serves to ensure we have a message to deliver to those around us and keep us focused on Christ so the values of the world don't penetrate our heart.

Today we are moving directly from corporate to individual, to personal.

Every community is made up of individuals, including every congregation. Every individual has their own uniqueness of experience, successes, failures, passions, hopes, and so forth. No two are the same. In that each person has a unique ability to be used of God in an individual way unlike any other. Even if the core of our message is the same, the way we've experienced it, share it, and understand it is individual to the person.

Each event we have that we put on as a congregation, the interactions with the community around us boil down to individuals interacting with individuals. Scripture talks about the power of our testimony. This is where that power shines through and takes hold.

It is in the sharing of our own experiences.

Something that often holds people back from sharing faith is a feeling of inadequacy. “I don't know my scripture well enough, what if someone asks me something I don't know?” “I'm no expert in theology, what if someone challenges me and stumps me?” These are honest questions and feelings.

I want to encourage you in a few things.

It's okay to say “I don't know”. It's okay to not have all the answers.

If my fear is a lack of Biblical knowledge perhaps this is my call to become more familiar with scripture and study the fullness of it.

If my fear is a lack of confidence in communicating theology maybe this is my call to take more time to

reflect on my own personal theology, my own sense of God and God's work in the world.

But there is one thing you will always be the absolute expert on. Yourself. Your story. Your loves and losses. Your passions and pains. Your baggage. Your hopes. Your experiences.

No one can tell you that you aren't who you are or experienced what you've experienced. You are the keeper and expert of your testimony. Part of the beauty of it is that when we come together and engage the community it's your testimony that you have to converse with folks wondering about a reason to believe. When we disperse and go our separate ways your testimony goes with you so that no matter where you find yourself your story holds the same power to persuade, inspire, and give hope.

Your life is the one story that you can answer to with the greatest detail and knowledge. Even seemingly odd instances.

When I was younger and hadn't jumped into ministry as a profession, as I felt something gnawing in my stomach that my occupation and life were in need of a change I had the same dream repeatedly. Over and over I dreamt that I was teaching teenagers about faith. The room was the same every time. My clothes were the same every time. It was absolutely identical.

Long story short eventually things worked out that I was hired as youth and young adult pastor at Franklin Street UMC. One Sunday night I was in the middle of teaching a lesson. It hit me like a ton of bricks that I was in the exact room in my dreams in the exact outfit I was wearing and these were the kids I was teaching.

That to me is an undeniable God thing. And no one in this room can tell me that wasn't real. I lived it. I felt it. You have those same moments in your own life.

Far greater than what I'm sharing, Paul and Peter had their own amazing testimonies. We read Paul's in Galatians. Peter's message in Acts was a powerful result of his own awakening from his personal story built walking arm in arm with Jesus Himself. Both powerful. Both compelling. Yet each unique.

Paul was a well educated Pharisee. An expert in the Law. An expert in the scriptures. He was so bold and passionate that he hated those Jews he considered blasphemers for accepting Jesus as Messiah that he violently persecuted them. Then his conversion story. Struck blind for three days and healed by a believer he heard the voice of Jesus along the way. He was restored to sight a changed man whose life would never be the same.

Paul went on adventure after adventure. He was humbled by the call of the One whose name he was persecuting. He was forgiven despite his horrible actions. He risked life and limb, was jailed, stoned, beaten, and hated by the people who once loved him. He established new communities of faith and built relationships he never dreamed of. He watched people's lives around him transformed as God used him to bring them to faith.

Peter was a rough and tumble fisherman who decided to follow this wandering, itinerant Rabbi. He witnessed miracles, walked on water, and heard the enlightening, authoritative teaching of Jesus firsthand. He walked with Christ in his earthly ministry.

He was humbled from his pride as he boasted he would never forsake Jesus yet denied him three times that very night. He was forgiven. He misunderstood the nature of Jesus' identity as Messiah the entire time Jesus was alive and woke up to the reality of it only after the resurrection.

Peter would go on to be present to witness the Holy Spirit descending. This man who used to open his mouth just to put his foot in it felt the power of the Spirit as it turned him into a powerful preacher, persuading many of his fellow Jews to faith in Jesus at Pentecost. He too would go on to bring many to faith, being used as an instrument of grace by God. Without a Peter Paul's ministry never would have been. It was Peter who revealed that the gospel was for Gentiles as well as Jews.

Peter's life became a grand adventure of ministry and faith with story on story of how he had seen God at work.

Now for our big question today. What about you? If you are a person of faith you have undoubtedly felt God. You are a person of faith for a reason. God was worked in and through you and on you. How? What is your story?

When someone says “faith doesn’t work for me” or “I don’t think it’s real”, what is your response if you were to ask “I hear you, would you mind if I shared what faith has meant to me?”

Seek it out. Take the time to look back over your life and see God at work. It will grow your faith and further build your testimony. You can go into the harvest field with confidence because you know your faith is solid such that the world can’t shake it. You go with confidence because you know you have a story that can’t be denied or argued because it’s yours.

Take the time to answer the questions in the bulletin. Hang on to them. Revisit them. As you do thank God for all that God has done for you. Thank God for the wonderful things you have seen come to fruition because you’ve been used by the Spirit. Take it as an ongoing calling to share your faith with those who need to hear it. As our hymns this morning remind us. You have a story to tell to the nations in the hopes that one day we’ll celebrate when we all get to heaven.

BIBLE STUDY 1 Samuel 28

This chapter is unsettling to many. As much as people of faith protest the idea of spirits and ghosts, here we have a ghost conjured up out of the ground. The ghost is none other than Samuel himself. The imagery has a lot to do with the understanding of the natural order. Samuel comes “up” from the ground. Why? They understood that there was a land of the dead where everyone went when they passed. The world was a tiered system where people lived on the earth as we know it, God’s heaven was upward, and the land of the dead, sheol, was down beneath the ground. This would have been where Samuel was coming from.

It also explains why Samuel would have told Saul that he would be “with” Samuel. In our understanding of the afterlife we think heaven and hell. In this case it doesn’t take much to assume that the righteous Samuel would be in heaven while the evil Saul would likely end up in hell. How could they end in the same location? In their grasp of things there was no separation after death. Everyone went to the same spot regardless.

None of this does anything to make more comfortable the questions about ghosts and spirits. But perhaps that’s not the point of the story.

Mediums and wizards were not to be consulted because that takes one outside the influence of God. If there was a problem, go to God. Go to the priest. Go to the prophets. Saul had abandoned God, though it seems he did try to ask of God in this moment. Why would God not answer Saul? Saul has killed the priests. Samuel is dead and it seems the prophets not wildly active. Saul’s own habits, attitudes, and actions have driven him far from God.

As Samuel predicts Saul’s demise very soon we are being shown just how spiritually destitute he is. At some point he had the good judgment to banish the wizards and mediums from Israel. Now he is running after them in desperation. Not to God. To the medium. Not only this, but to get to her he must risk the danger of doing so by going behind enemy lines. He is committed in every direction other than God.

He also gives the medium quite a startle. He is in disguise but as the scene unfolds and Samuel appears she recognizes him as Saul, the one who banished her. She feels tricked but Saul assures her that she is safe. Perhaps she recognized Saul precisely because this was Samuel. They had a familial relationship in life which made it all the more tragic when Samuel had to distance himself. This medium was specifically a medium that was known to contact familial spirits who had passed.

Samuel’s message, as we’ve noted, is severe. He reminds Saul of the previous prophecies about his losing Israel. Saul’s leadership comes to a failed end as Israel will be lost and Saul’s one job was to protect her. He predicts the death of Saul and his sons in a day.

We see two interesting moments with Saul. They are reflective of the last time he saw Samuel. The last time it ends with Saul being struck so that he dropped full onto the ground and lied there for a day. Vulnerable and at David’s mercy should David have desired to kill him. Here at Samuel’s

appearances he goes faced down on the ground. At the end of the interaction, again he falls out on the ground powerless.

What this engagement with the medium shows us is that Saul has truly hit rock bottom. He has ostracized himself from God and the bill is coming due quickly. The reign of Saul is at an end.

The gesture of the medium is kind and symbolic. She kills the fatted calf, a symbol of celebration and feasting, to prepare a meal for Saul. As he prepares to go to his end, Saul is given one final kingly feast, one last meal.

As we consider the arc of Saul's life we are reminded that ignoring and railing against God has consequences. Consequences for ourselves and for those around us. In the end, in some fashion there is always a reckoning. This reckoning for Saul is tragic.