

NOV 24, 2024

# *Marion* weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*November 17 sermon— “Why Are You Here?”*

*Hebrews 10:23-25, Acts 2:43-47, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13*

We are winding down our current series. The series if it hasn't been evident has been about evangelism. When I mentioned this series to someone before it even came around I was asked “didn't we do an evangelism series before?” Good question. Yes, we did. In that series the focus was looking at Biblical examples of evangelism. This has been different. We have been looking at Biblical principles of communication and evangelism that we need to apply NOW to our messaging to the world about Christ.

We've asked about the why, our intent for spreading the gospel. The how, what is our means of spreading it and is it done in such a way that it can be heard. The what, the hope that we have and are trying to communicate. The where, as we talked about the harvest fields it's evident that it's everywhere and everyone. And that we can bolster our faith in such a way as to confidently enter the field of the world knowing that we can be in the world and not of it.

We looked at barriers to why the gospel has been rejected, and what we might be able to do to overcome negative Christian stigma.

Last week we went very individual. Looking at the testimonies of Peter and Paul we asked “what is my testimony?” What is your story of faith? What are your experiences of God in life that no one can argue because they are yours and you are the expert of your life? What are the evidences of God at work in your life so that when some asks a scriptural question that you can't answer at the very least you can say “I don't know, but can I tell you what God and faith have done in my life?” This is your witness before humanity that reflects your faith in God.

This morning we are going to tackle another question that is essential when trying to grow the Kingdom of God and inviting folks into our community of faith. It is also deeply personal. Why are you here?

I've heard the question asked recently by multiple people “if we invite people into our church what are we inviting them into?” Well, I'm going to answer that this morning. But my answer doesn't matter. When you are in conversation with someone who doesn't believe, it's your answer that inspires. The first thing we have to ask ourselves is what is the nature of church? What did Christ intend? The fancy term for this is ecclesiology. What is your understanding of church?

Paul in his famous passage through Corinthians gives us a quick answer. We are the body of Christ. What does this mean? It means we are the representation of Christ in the world. Note the gravity of this.

We are responsible for representing the Jesus of the gospels. You've heard me qualify this a lot lately. ‘Of the gospels’. Not of culture, not of any particular nation, not of any particular twist. Of the gospels.

Churches can present Christ any way they want. They can draw in scads of people to believe in that Christ and commit to “him”. But if what they represent isn't the Jesus of the gospels all they are doing is leading people to idolatry. That's what it is. A false god even if we call it Jesus is still a false god. It's still idolatry. It gets people no closer to heaven than if they never went to church at all. This is the gravity of our call, and we'll see something critical in a few moments.

Hebrews is often quoted to guilt people into attending church. “Forsake not the assembling together as some of you are accustomed to do.” The next part is the motivation and the necessity. “So that you can encourage one another.”

It's not about duty. It's not about checking off a box. It's about gathering with the body of believers for mutual encouragement. Let's face it, it's not easy living a truly Christian life. It requires diligence, sacrifice, humility, openness, and a true ability to welcome those whom the religious self-righteous

would never want us to welcome. This isn't easy and if we're facing criticism we need others around us to support us and let us know we're on the right track. That our efforts aren't in vain.

It's more than that though today. Our kids need encouraged to be the church of today AND the church of tomorrow. They need the regular witness of saints who have lived a life of faith and can share their experiences and demonstrate what faithfulness looks like. They need us as parents to demonstrate that consistent connection with the community of faith matters. Our priorities often become those of our children.

Gathering as the faithful before God, living for Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit consistently is critical in setting a foundation that faith matters.

Finally there is a reason we gather on the first day of the week. It sets our week out focused on God. The reality for all of us, self included, is that when we unplug from the community of faith often our practice of faith and compass of faith go askew. We need the accountability of faithful community to keep us centered on the genuine Christ. Otherwise it's easy to go our own way and convince ourselves that Jesus agrees with us.

Too often I hear people who don't darken the church or crack their Bible claiming, "well God, or the Bible, says so and so", and they are flat wrong. They've heard something, believe it because it supports their sensibilities and that becomes "gospel". It's being connected together that helps us avoid this kind of mistaken identity and false gospel.

So thus far we see that the church represents Christ to the world and that the gathering consistently together of believers is critical.

Then we have the Acts 2 church. This finishes the chapter that Wyatt began last week. It is this passage that helps us really get to the core of what a church is supposed to be.

What attracted people to the early church was how different they were from the rest of the world. They were united, they were united in love and Spirit. They spent time together eating, studying, and worshipping. They cared for each other. If someone had a need it was met because everyone was willing to sacrifice for the greater good. They were gracious and forgiving. This was new and stood out.

It was effective then and it is effective now.

People as much as, maybe more than, ever want community. Community that cares about one another and lives into it genuinely. Who are more than lip service. The attributes of the Sermon on the Mount are as relevant now as then, and it is that kind of God centered, faithful living that inspires. Jesus' instructions to the disciples over the last supper in the gospel of John are relevant now just as then.

When people saw the church they didn't just hear faith spoken, they saw and felt it in action. Faith is never passive. It is always active and purposed.

It was all about a community of love and grace, the love and grace lived and commanded by Jesus Christ. Eventually this opened to include more than the Jews. The Gentiles were welcome as well. All were invited to the table no matter how misguided or idolatrous. And we trust that the Spirit was speaking to each and every one of them. Then. And now.

Note what Jesus never said was important in a church, and is never highlighted in the New Testament.

Emotion: When I was in the Pentecostal church emotion was at a premium. If you weren't emotional during worship you weren't holy. So there was plenty of emotion, and plenty of stuffing down the "wrong" emotions that weren't considered "holy" and faking the ones that were. Jesus never called us to emotionalism. His remarks about worship were strikingly few. Paul called us to "orderly" worship.

When faith is based in emotion there are some pitfalls. First, high emotion equates to high susceptibility to being manipulated. Also, when faith is equated to emotion, what happens when that emotion isn't there? Either the faith crumbles or false emotion is created to try and sustain the expectation. Neither of these is the foundation of a strong faith.

Jesus calls us to a staunch DECISION for faith. To follow. Emotion isn't the backbone.

**Worship Style:** Jesus didn't have a thing to say about music, facilities, service lengths or orders, none of it. Nothing to say about carpet colors or pew pads. It's all preference and has no genuine Biblical connection to what is pleasing to Jesus.

**Ritual:** He instituted communion but didn't really seem to care whether we dipped the bread in the juice or took them separately. He didn't say how often other than a vague "as often as you do this". He didn't care if we call it Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, or Eucharist. I am certain He never intended divisions and church fights to break out over this stuff.

He was baptized, he baptized, he called us to baptize. He never mentioned sprinkle or dunk. Never said in a church, baptistry, stream, lake, ocean or swimming pool. He didn't seem to have a sense that there would be some that did "count" and others that didn't. State of heart was what seemed to matter. And I am positive He never envisioned believers murdering one another over the issue and splitting entire denominations.

Yes, people have their preferences, however we do well to remember that Paul was very clear in Corinthians when he says that the presence of all kinds of spiritual gifts and other things mean nothing if they are not attached to love.

Have whatever music you want. Get excited. Enjoy your space. Have a rich ritualistic worship. Just make sure it's got at its center a loving community that cares for one another, reaches out as Christ called them to to meet the needs around them, and is connected in love.

Why do we invite people? It's simply to meet Christ through His faithful servants. To be loved and give an opportunity to love. To serve and in serving others serve God. To have nothing less than a heart and life transforming experience of God.

I hear people giving their "sales pitches" for their churches and I hear about music, and inviting space, and it's nice and informal, and there's tons of things for the kids to do and all kinds of other things. But what is absent? Jesus. I'm not saying Jesus isn't present. What I'm saying is that what's being used as a "draw" isn't the love of Christ, it's the trappings of the church that Jesus never seemed to care about.

What about this? "You'll run into the most warm, caring people you've ever met." "We take the call to serve our neighbor seriously, here's what we do." "We invite our kids to be active participants in worship services so they know they are vital to the church here, now, and today." "The one thing you will experience is love and welcome regardless of where you're at in life or who you are." "This congregation embodies the grace and forgiveness of Jesus."

This is what people should be looking for and what we should cultivate as a congregation. Why do you think year after year I keep pushing to remain here. Because I see the potential of our congregation and the genuine heart of Christ expressed in myriad ways through our people.

Why do we need to be a light attracting new believers and old ones who have left the church? The answer is in your hands this morning.

The visioning team worked to put together some resources that we'll be using more in the new year to expand on this sermon series. The ones you have today will get spruced up a bit. Their intention is to inform every person in our congregation of what we do to live out our faith in love for one another and our community.

Faith adds value to all of our lives and part of our task is to help people see not just the value faith can add to theirs, but ultimately what their faith adds to the community of faith as well. Each of us has present areas of life that needs value added. Knowing what your congregation is doing in fullness gives at the ready conversation to offer someone looking for hope. If we listen and hear where there is emptiness, and we know the life of our church, we can match the emptiness with the value offered in love.

For example someone frustrated with experiencing people and churches who only seem concerned with those inside their walls. Be familiar with the outreach brochure and you'll have more to share about how our congregation reaches outside our walls than you can likely handle.

Someone lonely and despairing, and believe me there is an epidemic of loneliness in our country. Get familiar with the community brochure.

Someone feeling stuck or stagnant in their own walk, get to know the faith brochure.

All of this is YOUR congregation. What YOU do to build faith, community, and service in the name of Jesus Christ. All of this is directly linked to this Acts 2 church. All of it is acts and ministries of genuine welcome and love.

Why am I here? Look around the pews and you'll find your answers. Look in these brochures and you'll see how the people around you in the pews are pursuing and living out a loving faith in Christ. And I believe this is worth fighting to get into the world in ways that meet people where they are at.

We're not inviting people into a program, we are inviting them into a family experience of the love of Christ.

Now the question to each person here be it in person virtual is the same. Why are you here? What do you find here?

If you have an idea or calling that isn't being expressed, why keep it to yourself? Share it so we can explore it.

Answer these questions as you did with last week's personal questions and not only have you found your rock steady testimony but also your personal testimony for your family of faith.

If you can't see what God is doing given the breadth of ministry within our congregation and as our congregation reaches out given all that's in your hands this morning please let me know. Let's set up a time to talk because sincerely I want to know where the struggle is.

Look around you. Show some teeth and smile. In the eyes around you I trust that you see the love of Christ shining. When we pull together in strength all pulling in the direction of bring Christ to the world there's nothing we can't do through the power of the Spirit.

## BIBLE STUDY 1 Samuel 29 & 30

Chapter 29 is about as straightforward as things come. A battle is brewing. We know that Saul is preparing his men against the Philistines and here the Philistines are gathering and preparing to go to war with Israel.

David's brutal tactic to raid enemies of Israel and murder every person they raided to keep it quiet has worked wonders. Achish truly has no idea that David has not been going after Israel as he believes. He sees David as a loyal ally, valiant fighter, and asset in the coming fight. The other Philistines don't see it that way.

The other commanders are wary and rightly so. They don't trust David to stay true to them during the battle. After all, what better way to ingratiate himself back into Israel than to turn on the Philistines and kill them from within their own ranks? David isn't allowed to come along.

Perhaps this is divine intervention? To be put in such a position would be incredibly dangerous and awkward for David. Much blood has been spilt to protect his journey to kingship. This "insult" that Achish is concerned will offend David is actually a saving grace. So David and his men return to their town to wait it out.

When they get home they find the Amalekites had raided them and taken their children and wives. This is different than David who had killed everyone when he did likewise. For David he saw this as necessity to cover his tracks. To the Amalekites the people were spoils and plunder. They were property not to be wasted.

Why would the people have been ready to stone David? Likely because someone needed to take heat for the raid. The men were off getting ready to go to battle, leaving the town unprotected. Had they been present the Amalekites would not have been successful. It was David that was in charge and took them away. Thus, David's fault.

His response is a strong one of leadership. He doesn't get defensive. He doesn't hide. He doesn't get offended. I imagine he could understand their grief and anger. He shared it as his family had been taken as well. Instead he takes action to correct the situation.

Unlike Saul David inquires of God. We know Saul's time is winding down quickly. The contrast between the faith of these men continues to be driven home. Saul, who acts in his own will and David who seeks the will of God.

God gives the green light to pursue the Amalekites.

As they travel they get to a piece of land that was too difficult for two hundred men to cross. Later David says "those who stay with the baggage". Rather than simply resting perhaps these two hundred had supplies that they were monitoring while the rest continued to pursue. Regardless David demonstrates mercy and compassion on his men.

Where another king might scold the men for being lazy and force the issue, David sees their weariness and allows that they can rest. As we'll soon see this confidence comes from his confidence in the hand of God with him. It's also a good reminder to us today to actually see the people who surround us, particularly if we are in leadership. Pushing beyond someone's abilities and means isn't always a badge of honor, fortitude, and courage. Sometimes it is foolhardy. Particularly when stakes are high if there are those who can't perform for some reason they can actually be a liability to the greater goal. Better to give grace, allow them to recuperate and then they can continue to serve another day. As luck would have it they stumble upon the servant of one of the raiding party. Again, mercy triumphs over harshness. This man's own master left him for dead with no food or water. David, the enemy, provides food and drink for him.

The order of events is important. David met his need before he had any idea that the man had information to offer. Were he to ignore the need and let the man by the wayside they would have missed out on the location of their families. Much later down the line Jesus tells us to meet the needs of others simply because the need exists. David has done this already. When we listen to the compassion in our hearts we never know what good might come from it.

This servant is still antsy and asks to be spared in exchange for information. It doesn't say if we was spared or not. I would presume that he was given everything that had come prior.

He leads them to the Amalekites who are enjoying their plunder. There is a big party with drinking and revelry. In relatively short work David and his men attack, slaughter, and retrieve all of their property including their families.

As they return there comes some dissension within the ranks of David's men. The four hundred who went to fight aren't wanting the two hundred who stayed behind to receive anything other than their wives and children. Clearly there was a sense that if they hadn't done the risky work they don't get to share in the reward.

Scripture calls these men grousing "corrupt and worthless." In our world today we might have difficulty processing this. After all, isn't fair fair? Those who do the work get the benefits. Those who don't miss out. It's kind of like the story of the little red hen that asked for help to bake some bread and no one would lend a hand. Then when the bread was made everyone wanted a piece. Thinking this way misses the point.

David says equal shares. Why? Because the victory didn't belong to the men. It belonged to God. The four hundred were no more responsible for the win than the two hundred who stayed back because God had given them the battle. As such, everyone gets equal share. In another sense perhaps we also can see where those who care for the supplies of the men are just as critical as the fighters. One supports the other, often vitally so. Thus David makes an edict that lasts that everyone in military service gets and equal take.

Again, we see David's deference to God. Here he isn't looking at things in human terms, it's spiritual. God is front and center being given the credit and the people called to humility.

It reminds me a bit of the image of the body of Christ. In our humanity we are disposed, indeed even taught, to think that some people and positions are more important than others. Pride creeps in. Hierarchy gets in the way of genuine affection for one another. The body can begin to look much like the rest of the world.

David's idea that everyone benefited from the hand of God and thus it puts them on equal footing is precisely what Paul was getting at himself. The body is made of many parts "all gifted by the same spirit". Everyone worshipping the same God. Therefore everyone is of equal importance as it takes all of us to make the body of Christ complete.

Finally he takes some of the spoils, keep in mind that the Amalekites had raided in Judah as well as the Philistines, and sends it off to Judah. Perhaps some of the motive was to return what had been taken. I would suggest more likely this was a political move as well. Show good will to Judah as David continues his journey to the throne. Remember, his wives were notably from Judah, solidifying a family connection to that tribe even as he was on the run.

We are about to wind down 1 Samuel. David has secured a victory and continues to build his own reputation and foundation. Saul will soon reap the unfortunate harvest of his actions.