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Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

November 24 sermon— “Transition & Transformation”

2 Corinthians 5:14-17, Ephesians 4:22-32, Galatians 5:11-12

This week we finish the series we have been in about bringing the gospel to the world. We have considered the why, the how, the what, and the where of it all. We've looked at the urgency regarding why it's so imperative that we are intentional about reaching people for Christ and inviting them into the experience and community of faith.

Perhaps most importantly the last two weeks we asked two important questions. The first was “why am I a person of faith?” It was all about your own personal testimony that can't be argued or debated. It's your story of faith that speaks even when answers about scripture or theology come up short. My hope is that it urged you to personal reflection on your story of faith that was encouraging, empowering, and uplifting.

Second we asked the question “why am I here?” What is it about this congregation that shows you the genuine love of Christ. We considered the Biblical, Christ centered sense of what the church is actually supposed to be as opposed to what we prefer it to be. We had the opportunity to celebrate the many expressions of the love of Christ that our congregation shares with one another and with the community around us. The bulletin held resources to equip you when coming into contact with a stranger, a nonbeliever, perhaps an alienated believer. What expressions of Christ do we offer to add value to someone's life and need?

These two testimonies, personal walk and the walk of your community of faith are essential in not only speaking the gospel but also offering real life, real time, real world examples of what faith lived out looks like. And why it matters.

Today we wrap up before Advent. In the new year we'll take this series and add even more meat to it. Through Advent we will engage different kinds of hope that exist and that Jesus brings to us as God broke into the world as a child. For now, there is something that I hope will give us food for thought, prayer, and excitement.

We are in a time of transition and transformation. This is not new. Not for any individual, nor any congregation or even denomination.

The passages about becoming a new creation and putting off the old man while putting on the new are familiar. They call us to a transformation of heart and life when we come to faith in Christ. If there is not transformation, if everything stays the same, it's a sign that perhaps we haven't actually come to a genuine faith.

In this spirit of transformation and becoming new, we must acknowledge that it's not a “one and done” thing. We don't come to faith and then all at once we get a whammy that fixes all the broken in us and straightens all the crooked. Coming to faith is the beginning of a journey. Day by day we seek God and as new habits, values, and parts of our lives that displease God come to our awareness we are called once again to transform.

We are called to change, to become something new. Becoming a new creation is a constant process for every believer. It continues until we move from this life to the next. Stagnation isn't an option for a believer. Lip service that “I'm the worst sinner” when nothing ever changes in our lives means something is drastically wrong. We move from new creation to new creation.

And it's a wonderful journey. It's constant evolution of life, and of how we understand God. If my understanding of God hasn't changed from 3rd grade I need to study harder. If all my views from 3rd grade have done is drive deeper with no change I need to study harder. We all have understandings, beliefs, and theology that is off the mark. Together it's our task to help sort out what needs to be let go, what needs to change, and what we need to cling to.

The change and letting go can be difficult. The transition from who we were to who we are being called to be can be fraught with emotion and fear. Some of us have been told that if we don't toe the

line of this or that we're going straight to hell. Some of us might have comforting ideas that have helped us through difficult times and giving them up is concerning. What will carry me through the next hard time?

It might mean losing friends, a job, a social group. Sacrifice is part of the life of faith, and as we become new creation after new creation sometimes the sacrifice is dear.

This doesn't mean every transition and transformation is perilous. Some may be quite simple. But every now and then that time comes when it's really hard. It may carry very serious consequence.

The church is no different. It moves from new creation to new creation. It does it on a mass scale which can mean mass confusion, anger, fear, sadness, and so on when it happens. Large groups of people are told "you were wrong about that" to ideas of faith that they've held on to for decades and the congregation or denomination maybe even centuries. "We're seeing things differently" isn't welcomed with "great, I'm glad we figured it out". It's met with anger, with "how dare you tamper with this", or with confusion and lack of trust. "I listened to you and now you're telling me you were wrong? How can I trust you now?"

Church transformation happens typically in watershed moments in history. It began with the earliest church.

First the church was for Jews and Jews alone. Then they allowed Gentiles in. Bang. First transition and transformation.

This passage in Galatians reflects Paul's incredible frustration during this time. Jewish Christians would infiltrate Gentile congregations and try to convince them that they had to become some degree of Jewish in order to also be Christian. Part of that expectation was circumcision. I'd imagine this may have provided a barrier for some male converts.

Paul was so angry that these Gentile Christians were being told they had to observe a legalism that his own people, the Jews, could not sustain that he railed against them. "You want them to circumcise?! I wish you circumcise all the way and castrate yourselves!"

Transition and transformation. Then they sorted it out. Christianity pulled away from Judaism. It became its own thing. A persecuted thing, but it's own.

Then Christianity was legalized, even celebrated as the religion of the empire. What to do?

Some embraced the newfound power, wealth, and ease. They got tied to the politics of the empire and faith began down a road that led to corruption. Transition and transformation. Certainly there were those who remained faithful, but how tempting would it be to go from being oppressed to being able to oppress the ones who oppressed you?

On the opposite end were the desert fathers. Those who believed suffering was an essential part of faith to be like Christ. If others wouldn't do it to them they would have to do it to themselves. So the ascetic practices began. Self-flagellation, long fasts, living in isolation. Monastic communities spring up with vows of celibacy, silence, and poverty. Suffer through deprivation to be closer to God.

Devout? Certainly. Embracing the fullness of the Great Commission? Maybe not so much but when you have the power of the empire pushing people to the faith the Great Commission doesn't matter quite as much.

Good things happened. People came to faith. Christ was preached. Bad things happened as well. Too many atrocities committed in Jesus' name.

Martin Luther had enough. He spoke out against the evils of the church. More transition and transformation. This was ugly. Thousands died. Christians killing Christians. Theology was changing. How to interpret scripture was changing. What people had been told to believe was being shown to have lies and serious holes in it.

Some embrace the new way of seeing Christ and God. Others refused. Two churches emerged and there was hostility to be certain. Beliefs changed. Even in the Catholic church there was reform from within because of Luther. "Why did we believe this before and now have to believe something different now?"

After this there were many many more transitions and transformations. New understandings of scripture sprung up, new senses of theology, new leaders, new eras, changing circumstances, and through all of it churches split, there were hard times and feelings and people had to wrestle with what they believed up against what someone was now telling them was a new and better way of believing. Decisions had to be made.

The church split again and again. Sadly far too often it was tense, hostile, vicious, and even murderous. This is Christian on Christian through history.

Every time there is a shift there is a transition and unfortunately too much hurt.

Recognize that much of the theology and interpretation we have today isn't "all the way back to the first church". Over thousands of years there has been change on change. The end times theology that's so popular really didn't get rolling until the 1800s. The Trinity doctrine we hold wasn't solidified until centuries after the church began. Even the agreed upon books of the Bible weren't agreed upon for centuries and Martin Luther renegotiated them again when he broke away.

I share all of this because we are in another one of these moments, eras, transitions and transformations.

There is a principle of group dynamics that I'd like to insert here as it's relevant. Typically it's used in more team or corporate circumstances but it applies to congregations as well.

Every group goes through a series of steps. Forming, storming, norming, and performing.

The group forms for a task.

Then the group has to form an identity. Who are they? What is their identity? How do they function together? What roles do people play? This is the storming.

Once they settle they settle on their own agreed upon expectations. They agree who plays what role. They have their own norms.

When this happens now they can perform at their optimum.

There's a catch. Changes in group makeup, goals, and context often mean that they have to go back through these steps all over again. If the goal changes maybe the roles have to change. If there are people exiting and entering the group each time the status quo is upset and they have to go through it again. It may not take long or it may be truly painful. But they have to do it.

Congregations don't think about this much but we are in a constant state of flux and in this season more so than typical.

Every time we have someone leave us whether it be passing away, moving away, or leaving to another congregation we re-enter this cycle. Every time we have someone new come to be part of our community of faith we also have to re-enter this cycle.

It's not a bad thing mind you. It's very healthy. It's part of this Christian model of becoming a new creation over and over again, hoping that each time we are getting closer to God and more like Christ.

In our present circumstance we have lost beloved members to the natural passing from life to death to life. We have also lost beloved members because of the controversy about how COVID was handled. We have also lost beloved members because of how the denomination came down at General Conference.

This is a flashpoint of transition and transformation.

So much of the issue today is the entwining of politics, social principle, and religion.

Within our congregation I would like to propose a few pieces of reflection.

*Unlike many other denominations, our denomination has not told us what we must believe in the realm of human sexuality as individuals or as a congregation. We are free to follow our own conscience in the matter as individuals and as a collective.

*I do not see anyone here looking to see our congregation activated as some political arm be it to the right or to the left.

*I can tell you this from firsthand accounts. The extremes push so many people who are seeking Christ to the side. The extremes will attract the extreme. Where are the communities of faith that will catch the ones in the middle who aren't looking for a fight but just looking to be understood, to under

stand, to love and be loved, and to follow Christ as best they can?

In other words, in this climate of religious and political upheaval, how do we reach out to those that the upheaval has pushed aside and yet Christ earnestly is seeking?

I'm going to finish this with a qualifier. What I'm about to say will sound a certain way. The reason I'm pushing us is because I believe we stand against the spirit of exclusion that is so prevalent. So please take this as a compliment.

Jesus said we are to love our enemies. Those who stand against us, in whatever form or fashion. Too much in Christianity has forgotten this. Enemies are excluded, demonized, and even hated.

In our present time, in this transition and transformation, how do we bridge the gap between those with whom we disagree? How do we love those others label as the unlovable?

In a world of extremes how do we find those that are left in the cold because they aren't extreme? Oddly this requires a certain extremity but not the kind we see so often. It requires extremity of love, understanding and compassion. We draw those outside the echo chambers of extremism and being "so solidly planted".

How do we do this without feeling like we're compromising? Because we look at the witness of scripture and history and recognize that all throughout time there has been transition and transformation. The most destructive and unchristian has been when supposed Christians have been unwilling to settle, humble, and sit and listen to their fellow brothers and sisters. And even, God forbid, those outside the faith who might give an honest outsider's perspective.

Times of transition and transformation are times of opportunity. They are windows that open so that we can experience a newness of creation and recreation as we listen for who God is asking us to become. There is excitement in uncovering who has been left out and experiencing the joy that comes from welcoming them in.

As every group transitions and transforms, so does every individual. We are going into a season of preparation to celebrate the birth of Jesus. This is a season of hope. In this time of transition and transformation ask these questions with expectation.

In the new year, what does God have in store for me? What new thing am I being called to be created into?

In the new year, what does God have in store for our congregation? How will we be stretched? How will we be called to ministry? Who will we be called to reach that we've never reached before?

Fearing the transition can blind us to what God is doing. Embracing it opens our eyes to the possibilities that are unfolding before us and inviting us to change the world around us through the power and grace of God.