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Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

January 5 sermon— “It’s Beyond Me”

Exodus 34:1-7, Matthew 17:14-20, Mark 9:27-29

Happy New Year! This year we have much to do together. I’d like to share something I’ve been pondering as we head into 2025. For some of you this will not be a surprise. It’s no secret that the United Methodist Church has had some upheaval in the last couple years that came to a significant head in 2024. The changes that have occurred throughout the denomination and in many if not most individual local congregations means that all of us have work to do to build the church in 2025. This means looking at where we are headed and evaluating where we need to head together.

The visioning team has worked to give some tools to equip us as we go into the mission field in this new year. We’ll have some congregational meetings early here in 2025 to discern and learn together. Something has gotten in the church’s way that has caused damage to the church’s witness. Unfortunately the United Methodist Church got a double whammy, but Christianity in America is struggling as a whole regardless. The issue at hand is that the focus has gone to politics of the nation and politics in the larger denomination. The energy we’ve seen this create has interfered with the where the focus and energy needs to be. For every person of faith, every congregation, and every denomination should be. Ministry.

The life’s blood of a local congregation isn’t in any politics that swirl around out of our reach. Each of us is responsible for our own choices and faith. What others do certainly matters, however I will not be held responsible for what you or anyone else decides or does. Similarly, each local congregation is responsible only for their ministry. To whom do we bring the love of Christ? Who do we invite into faith? Who is embraced into our fellowship? What have been barriers to our ministry and how do we overcome them?

Politics of any form are not where our focus needs to be when it comes to our faith and our church. Our focus needs to be on Christ and how we are bringing His light to bear in the community around us.

This is a long introduction to bring us to our message topic this morning. Today we are reminded of a fundamental of our faith that is missed or at least underestimated too often. Next week we will consider one of the greatest keys to unlocking the power in this fundamental.

It begins with a phrase. “It’s beyond me”. We used this to communicate when we can’t grasp or understand something. There is a mystery grand enough that we throw up our hands as if to say “I don’t get it and I doubt I will.”

If that’s where we end it with certain things, we are missing the greatest power at our disposal to overcome. If something is “beyond me”, where do I need to start looking for an answer? First, yes, I need to look. I may need to look by asking people around me who know more or seeking out resources to help me in my understanding. Sometimes, however, all of that still falls short. I have to look to the One Who is beyond me. I have to recognize that some issues have, by necessity, a spiritual solution because the rest aren’t sufficient to accomplish the task.

God’s people reaching out to the God who exists among us, within us, and BEYOND us is cover to cover in scripture. How did all that exists come into being? The One who is beyond us. Who led the heroes like Abraham, Moses, the prophets, and the few good kings like David? God. All of them sought beyond themselves for direction and answers. Accountability that mattered most came from God. Seeking redemption here in this world was futile. Where did it come from? Beyond, when God was made flesh. To what authority did the apostles appeal? The authority of God, revealed in Jesus, and guiding and empowering them through the Holy Spirit.

How often do we truly seek the supernatural power of the Spirit to overcome?

People give lip service to it. Typically where I tend to hear it most is when there is a disease, injury, or ailment that seems to be truly terminal. The doctors have given a grim prognosis so we turn to God

looking for a miracle from beyond. There is nothing wrong with this at all. We should seek God. At the same time there are other more common circumstances that merit equally fervent seeking in order for our individual and collective witnesses and lives to transform in meaningful ways.

We see the disciples transform in the New Testament into instruments of power and inspiration starting a movement that changed the very world. The Beyond came to rest upon them on Pentecost as the Holy Spirit descended in power.

One of the great obstacles for anyone to overcome is the culture in which we find ourselves. The self-made man is praised. "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps." Asking for help is weak. Make it on your own steam. All of this encourages us to go it on our own and discourages looking outside ourselves, even to the God who would have the answers that we seek.

Yet as our scripture for today tells us when the disciples were trying to cast out a demon, some things can only be done with faith. Some things can only be done with prayer and fasting.

As an aside, in some more modern translations you'll see verse 21 in this passage in Matthew omitted, though the expression that this can only be done through "prayer and fasting" is familiar. Scholars have come to a consensus that after Matthew's gospel had been written someone dropped that prayer and fasting line in from Mark's gospel at a later date. I only offer this so if you happen to come across this seeming "glitch" you'll know why.

The point in all of it remains the same, and I do not believe it is limited to casting out demons. In fact Jesus doesn't say it's limited to that action alone. He simply mentions that in that moment they'd stumbled on something that required a deeper faith, a deeper ask. They can't do it under their own steam and power. They need to ask God's help to accomplish the task. Without it they are bound to fail.

When we find ourselves in an uphill battle that we can't seem to win or gain any ground with this is what we need to remember. At the moment the answer is beyond us. And that's precisely where we need to look. Beyond us. To God. To the Spirit.

I was reminded of this and inspired by a read that I've been slowly but surely undertaking at the recommendation of someone who dropped off a book for me to look at. It is a book that was life changing for them and I was asked to read it to get some perspective on a work that helped save their life and also shape their understanding of God.

It's called "The Big Book".

The reality that some things can't be solved without a spiritual awakening and assist from One who is beyond us is a truth that's been established in practice and countless lives throughout the ages.

I would suggest that some incidental places this occurs is at a time when we're looking for a miraculous spiritual miracle of healing of some sort from beyond. I'm talking about more than just the prayer for the miracle.

Some losses, tragedies, accidents, and illnesses are so severe that it is beyond us as to how to endure them. Whether we're the one in the genuine thick of it or it's someone we love, the burden can feel heavier than we can bear. We may not have that strength inside us. But we know the One Who can help us through the moment. It is God. The One beyond us when the answer is beyond us.

Unfortunately too often in such moments people actually move away from the God who is waiting to help them. Some reject God out of anger or blame God for what has happened. Some can't stomach others seeing them in such a broken state. Whatever the reason, the answer to what is plaguing them is a spiritual one.

To get it, we have to be willing to be humble, to be bold enough to ask for it, and open enough to receive it.

We'll look more into this next week. For now the more common and imminent places where the answer may be as much spiritual as anything else roots in our Exodus passage.

The scripture from Exodus is about what is referred to as "generational curses". Scripture tells us that this is no longer the case. That we'll not be punished for the sins of those who came before. This is a comfort and a grace.

While we might not refer to them as curses, we do see this idea of hardships and difficulties being passed on generation to generation. We don't call them curses. We call them cycles and genetic dispositions.

Many of these traits may not be able to be overcome with conventional means, though all means should be sought. Things like addiction for many are genetically hard wired. There are values and attitudes like misogyny, arrogance, rage, and many of the "isms" that our world faces that are so engrained that they seem impossible to shake. There are values and ideals that are driven into us all our lives that even if we wake up and realize they aren't in step with God's desires feel "beyond us" to conquer.

Therapy is a fix for some, but not all. Medication helps some, but for many it doesn't cure. Treatment alone may not be working. Until the spiritual is tapped into in addition to other support.

Many, including people in the church, have toxic or maybe just problematic traits that they haven't been able to lick their whole lives. Many throw up hands and say "it's beyond me, I guess I'll have to live with it". And of course so does everyone else around me as well.

In ministry, do some of these realities damage our witness? Do some of them blind us to change that might need to take place in order to do ministry in a way that Christ is calling us to? Do some of them add pain and stress to our lives where they don't have to if we can overcome them?

When we look in the mirror at the troublesome aspects of who we are the good news is that we're not alone in our battle to become better. We don't have to settle even when the fight seems insurmountable. The same power, grace, and love that transformed people all through the Bible is still transforming people today.

It isn't just the big ticket diseases and circumstances that baffle us. It isn't just a toss up prayer asking God to step in and hope that God will fix everything. It IS an embrace of God and a partnership with God at the lead surrendering to God's direction and power because we've finally owned that we can't figure it out on our own.

And this can happen with circumstances and situations that to someone else might feel mundane or a matter of just thinking or willing it through. Yet in our experience the matter is beyond us.

We serve a God who time and again has demonstrated a desire and willingness to be with us through thick and thin. But God is not one to violate our freedom. We have to remember God, to want God, and to ask God.

Things that are beyond us are the epitome of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12 when he reminds us that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness.

There is a true story about a church board meeting, not ours, but another, and they were absolutely at a loss for how to handle some issue facing the congregation. The board members were arguing and could come to neither answer nor consensus. Someone spoke up and said "why don't we take a moment and pray". Another on the board said "has it really come to that?"

Yes. It comes to that. In life and ministry more than we might want to admit we don't have all the answers, or the answers we think we have don't seem to be working.

The answer is beyond ourselves. It's a spiritual thing, which should be for the Christian a familiar and very present reality in our lives.

2025 is going to be brimming with opportunity for us. If we seize it personally we all will have opportunity to become more than we are today. As a congregation we will find avenues of attitudes and ministry that have the potential to reach people that haven't been reached by this or any other congregation around us. Anyone who is part of our congregation will have opportunity to step into roles to be used of God in ways you may not have been before, and that is an exciting proposition.

What I ask is that together we enter this year recognizing that the answers to many of our questions may well lie beyond us. The first step to a future that is greater than we can conceive is to humbly recognize that what we need is more than we can muster on our own. We don't wait until the last to seek the spiritual connection with God that will transform us and show us where we need to turn. Let us humbly seek God first, surrendering to God's wisdom and strength, and allow the power of the Spirit to do all it has wanted to do all along.

BIBLE STUDY 2 Samuel 4-5

Chapter 4 is brief. Though brief there are several important pieces to note from it. The first is the assassination of Ishbaal. In the absence of Abner, Ishbaal seems to be of weak constitution. Perhaps the dismay of Israel was that they knew the quality of Abner and now the thought is “great, this is what we’re left with to lead?” This may explain why these brothers took it upon themselves to relieve Israel of Ishbaal.

With Ishbaal’s death we see the genuine end of the house of Saul’s rule in Israel. The end of rule, yes, but not the end of Saul’s bloodline. There’s an odd introduction placed in the early midst of the narrative. We are introduced to Jonathan’s disabled son Mephibosheth. Clearly he is not a threat to the throne. If we remember David’s oath to Jonathan he is also under no threat from David. What is evident at this moment is that Saul’s line is still alive through Jonathan’s son.

These brothers then dispatch Ishbaal in short order. There seem to be two accounts of how they killed him, though both are in the same setting. The king is vulnerable and resting in his home. They come in under false pretenses and kill him. In one instance they hit him in the stomach. In the other they behead him. Subtract either from the text and nothing misses a beat suggesting that perhaps there were two accounts of Ishbaal’s demise that were tracking at the time. Either way, he is gone making way for David to become king over all Israel.

What unfolds next is akin to the Amalekite who claimed to kill Saul when he brought the news to David. These brothers bring Ishbaal’s head as proof of his death thinking that David will be pleased with their work. They may have even expected a reward or some position in David’s royal leadership. What they received was very different.

David speaks of the Amalekite as a lesson to his attitude towards assassinating or killing a king of Israel. He’s not about it. In gruesome fashion David orders both of them executed. This once again smacks of a political message. This king has no desire to rise to prominence as the result of some underhanded killing of the prior or rival king. This is precedent setting that to do such a thing is not rewarded but punished. Hopefully this is a deterrent from potential assassins during his own reign.

Another perspective arose during our discussions of this chapter. We might assume since David relayed the story of the Amalekite that these brothers should have known better because of what had already been done to this “killer of Saul.” Perhaps we assume too much. Communication was much slower in that time than we have it today. It was also likely less reliable. We have no idea if these brothers had any idea what happened with the Amalekite. This could be the first they’d heard of it. Imagine their surprise! “Wait, what? We didn’t know about this!” If they had maybe they wouldn’t have done what they did. The picture this paints is quite different from two figures boldly facing the consequences for actions they might have known were unfavorable. It looks like two confused men who had no idea they were doing something wrong in David’s eyes. Then they meet with such a grisly end.

Just as David honored Abner, in some form he honors the relationship Ishbaal had with Abner as he lays him (or at least his head) to rest alongside Abner. I would like to think there was a heartfelt moment as this occurred. Once again, however, there is also the optics of a king honoring a king, sending a message for his subjects to follow suit.

Chapter 5 follows and is a very clear summary demonstrating David’s quick rise to excellence and completing in short order what Saul failed to do in decades.

The initial set up is the overwhelming receiving of David by all of Israel. It’s unlikely that there was some formal “council” of “elders” that convened as a means of affirming David. Nevertheless some form of representation honored that David was chosen to be King. The “bone and flesh” reference is one of solidarity together not just with David but also one another. By the time this was actually written it had been established that Israel then did not see herself as a confederation of tribes but as true kinfolk, united together.

Once king, David goes to establish a capital. As we understand it from the later building of the Temple, Jerusalem incorporated the holy mount of Israel. What better place to establish the center of govern

ance than to pair it with the holiness of the God who leads the nation? The city was occupied by the Jebusites.

When David and his men get there, they are mocked and told that even the weakest of the inhabitants would defeat them. As David and his men prepare to attack David uses their insult as he calls on the men to take the city. He says to take on their “blind and lame”. In conquering it he calls it the “City of David”.

This might seem a bit arrogant. Why would he refer to this city that was to be the ruling place for Israel as his own? At that moment there is no sense that David went after the city with any army from either Israel or Judah. He most likely took it with his own army of men that he’d assembled in recent times. When he captured Jerusalem it wasn’t for Israel or Judah. It was for David, thus the name. Lending a sensibility to this we refer back to other episodes. Keep in mind that it seems that when David was acting on his own behalf we don’t see him inquiring of the Lord. When he is acting on behalf of Israel he does. We have no report of David going to the Lord for direction or permission before moving on Jerusalem.

The next signal of David’s success in setting Israel as a nation on the world’s stage is that King Hiram sent supplies and craftsmen to David. While this reads like a one way gift, it was likely not quite that. Such interactions were rarely if ever acts of regard or charity. They were instances of trade. Even if it’s not mentioned explicitly, King Hiram didn’t come expecting nothing and left with something in exchange for all he’d brought to King David.

While it might be convenient to read this as Tyre paying tribute to a mighty Israel, doing so takes away from a much larger significance of what God is accomplishing through David. Nations didn’t trade with other nations that they didn’t recognize as exactly that. A nation that is a worthy trade partner and peer. This engagement demonstrates that Israel has established itself not simply before God, but as an entity worthy of notice by the surrounding peoples.

It’s at this point that scripture tells us that David is “beginning to perceive” that he is king. This seems odd to me that with everything that’s transpired here is the place where David is reckoning with his kingship. He’s been anointed multiple times. He’s been crowned king of Judah. Saul, Jonathan, and Achish have recognized his being set apart for Israel. Abner has worked to hand him the kingdom. Ishbaal is now gone. How much has to happen before this guy grasps his role?

Many of us might relate to this on a smaller scale. Even when we work hard for a goal, once that goal has arrived sometimes it seems like a dream. We have difficulty believing what we’ve worked for so long and diligently has finally become a reality. It can take a lot of settling before we finally truly accept what we’ve been given or earned, and to begin to live into whatever it is in its fullness.

Next in line David takes more wives and concubines (the names of whom we do not get here) and have more children. He is doing a couple things. He is increasing his line of heirs and legacy. He is also elevating himself to the status of other kings around him. Having a preponderance of wives and concubines was part of being king. David fills this role in his own life, making him on par with the dignitaries of other nations.

Finally we see David do what Saul could not. He defeats the nuisance of the Philistines. As we’ve noted, in these battles David inquires first of the Lord. Now, as king, he is acting on behalf of his nation. He sees God at the helm of Israel and so goes to God for instruction. In two instances God authorizes David to go to battle, giving instructions for victory with both.

The author of this book is likely doing something of an undoing in the writing of these incidents. David undoes Saul’s problematic beginnings. Saul in his early reign loses two battles to the Philistines, and the Philistines remain a problem throughout his reign. David has two victories over the Philistines and for the most part they do not return as a significant problem. Saul loses the ark to the Philistines. The Philistines have their idols taken by David.

Where Saul fails, David succeeds. In all matters. Saul failed to establish a center of governance, a cohesion that elevated Israel to the status of a nation to be negotiated with by other nations, and to end the issue of the Philistines. David succeeds in all of this in relatively short order. There can be no

mistake that not only is David king, but David is the king of God's choosing and upon whom God's favor rests.

Success can be a fickle thing, or at least interpreted in a fickle way. Today, when something succeeds that a person of faith agrees with or likes, it's easy to put God's stamp on it. "This is God's plan and desire." On the other hand too often when something succeeds that is disagreeable, the response may be "well that's just the devil taking control and leading the world astray." It's amazing how "God's desire" and "the devil's plans" coincide with what people agree or disagree with, love or hate.

David's rise to prominence is well documented to be with God's blessing and strength. At the same time we have seen that David has not always acted in a noble, kind, or merciful fashion. This is why we've taken the time to note when David is acting in his own judgment vs. God's counsel.

Whatever our personal circumstances and choices to make, we do well to remember that should we perceive God leading in a direction we must follow it. We should do our utmost to honor God in the pursuit of whatever end we are in motion towards. Should we achieve what we set out to achieve, as David's future will remind us, a most significant trait must be to set aside ourselves in favor of God's design and direction.