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Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

January 5 sermon— “Radical Honesty”

Acts 10:9-22, Exodus 3:13-15, 4:1-17, 2 Samuel 12:11-14

This week’s message is a follow up from last week’s. Last week we looked at a fundamental truth of our faith. Sometimes the only way we’re going to find and answer or overcome an obstacle is to go to God and seek a spiritual solution. In fact, going to God should be a first step even when engaging other sources to try and sort something out. While there are things like counselors, doctors, therapists, mentors, and so on that God places in our path to help us, there are times and circumstances where even using all of the resources available, turning to the God that is above all is necessary to overcome. Today we look at a key to unlock this power, inspiration, guidance, and strength. That key is radical honesty. When we are looking to God for help, we can hold nothing back. The mirror has to be crystal clear. We’ll see some reasons as we go today, but the simplest reality is as follows. If we are not radically honest with ourselves and with God about our circumstance, we are putting limits on what we are willing to accept help with and what kind of help we are willing to receive.

This may be one of the hardest things to do. It means personally owning my faults and failures... completely. It means if things in life be it my own or corporately as a congregation aren’t moving where I want them to, I have to be completely straight about why, and what my part in the problem might be.

In more positive instances, I have to be willing to accept that being honest about giftedness, calling, and so forth requires a willingness to also follow God in how I use these things. I don’t get to put up the parameters, God does. I don’t get to decide who does and does not deserve the benefit of what God is trying to do through me, God does.

A few months ago I preached a message that I could tell unsettled some folks in the pews and I’m sure also watching at home. I shared real life, honest stories about how people in our own back yard have been hurt by the church. The reason wasn’t to be critical. It was to be honest of the things that occur near to us in Christianity so that we are bluntly aware of what kinds of hurt we are called to heal. Sometimes there are things we don’t want to face, yet they are real and facing them essential to realizing our best selves as individuals and our best self as a congregation.

1 John is arguably one of the foundational scriptures for this sense of honesty. We read that “anyone who says they do not sin as a liar and the truth is not in them.” “Anyone who claims to love God and hates their brother is a liar.” It also reads that “if we confess our sin, God is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Honesty is at the heart of living into all of this sense of discipleship. I don’t like to think about my mistakes and the uglier side of who I am. Yet without doing so what hope do I have to change it? How can I ask forgiveness for things I won’t even admit? If loving God depends on loving my neighbor, how can I love God if I don’t honestly ferret out those grudges or bitterness I may harbor towards those around me?

The upside is glorious and beautiful. If we are honest. If we confess fully God will pour grace upon grace out on and for us. The Holy Spirit exists to help us, Jesus says He will send us a “helper”, and to strengthen us to grow and follow God more closely. Radical honesty is critical in this endeavor.

Consider our scriptures for today.

Peter has his vision of the “unclean” animals. He is told to eat and replies that he won’t, he can’t! He’s never eaten anything unclean. God tells him that whatever God says is clean he should not call unclean. This isn’t just about food. As the story progresses Peter is called to minister to a Gentile.

Jews didn’t like Gentiles, particularly Roman ones. They were the ones who oppressed them. Who treated them poorly and unfairly. With whom they were not to mix. They were idolators. They were unclean. Yet God instructed to bring the gospel to them. Peter becomes the apostle to lead this

charge though Paul took up that greater part of going to the Gentiles later.

What had to happen for this change in Peter? Yes, he followed God's command. He also had to be honest about his own prejudices. He had to confront what he'd done and been taught all his life about clean and unclean with both food AND people. He had to get over that, with God's help, to minister as he did.

Peter also shows us that it's not easy. In Galatians, well after this moment, Paul relates an incident where Peter is in the company of Gentiles and not worrying about observing Jewish cleanliness customs. Then some Jews arrive and suddenly he reverts to following them. Pressure has a funny way of tempting us back to old mistakes and attitudes. Paul has to remind him of the problem in this relapse. We trust that Peter was reminded and reclaimed the new freedom from the prejudices of seeing others as unclean,

Jonah shows us the personal price of not doing this. Of not honestly confronting our own baggage and allowing it to continue to rule us.

Why did he run from his mission to preach repentance to Nineveh? He hated the Ninevites. He didn't want God to spare them so he wouldn't even give them the chance to change. No warning. When God forces his hand and he does what he's been asked to do, preach to the Ninevites about their sin and call them to repentance, he then removes himself and waits to see what will happen.

When the Ninevites change their ways and are spared, Jonah is upset, he's miserable. That's how he's left in the story. God is pleading with him to see the Ninevites through gracious eyes and as valuable human beings. He's asking Jonah to confront his own bigotry against them, to be honest about his own hatred so he can face it and change it. When Jonah refuses he is a most miserable person. As if to make the point stronger, the story shows us the sinning ones that were hated changing and being kindly spared while the one who should have been the hero, the prophet, remaining stuck in his own hate and sin and receiving the reward of misery for his hard headedness.

The ones who confronted their darkness in honesty gained while the one who refused lost.

David, the man after God's own heart, is another example of hard, radical honesty being the best policy. He'd slept with another man's wife and then set her husband up to be killed in battle to cover his sin as she'd become pregnant. The prophet Nathan confronts David with a story about a man who had in essence done the same thing to someone else's property. When asked what the penalty for the man should be David said "he should be put to death." Nathan reveals that the man is David, and David IMMEDIATELY owns up to his sin. A punishment is pronounced. David's response is humble and contrite before God. Ultimately he receives his consequences and moves forward continuing to hold God in regard be it in his own good or bad choices. What keeps this imperfect king in God's good graces? Moments like these where he doesn't hide from his problems and mistakes but rather owns them and turns to God.

He doesn't claim some kingly authority to do whatever he wants. He doesn't try to talk, bribe, or loophole his way out. He doesn't try any of the tactics that have been voiced as frustrating that people of influence, means, and power use to skate consequences for their actions. He owns it, deals with it, and moves forward.

Radical honesty isn't just about conquering our lesser selves or solving problems. It's also the key to living our fullest lives, embracing all God has placed within us, and overcoming false humility and modesty.

Moses' story is case in point. God saw in Moses a deliverer. Moses saw in himself a murderer that wouldn't make it if he returned to Egypt. "Who should I say sent me?" God gives Moses a name that they will recognize, I AM. "What if they don't believe me?" God gives him miracles to perform to convince the people that he has been sent by God. "I don't talk so good...I'm not your guy." God drafts Aaron into service as the mouthpiece for Moses.

We often look at this as Moses trying to weasel out and he may well have been. Through another lens perhaps this is Moses being brutally honest about his own insecurities. "God, this is the stuff I'm worried about. How can I be the one to do this?" In that honesty God answers him to the question, each

and everyone. He removes Moses' obstacles because Moses is honest about them. And Moses and Aaron go on to ultimately free the Hebrews.

Jesus and the apostles had incredible Spiritual power at their disposal. They also had a bold calling to lead and draw their world into communion with God. They were honest about this. They were honest about the abilities and calling that God had given them. Because of that honesty they were able to fully live into their purpose in power and boldness.

At the same time, they also gave credit where credit is due. They gave God the glory for their abilities. They cited Jesus and the scriptures as the reason for their message. They demonstrated that we can be honest about our talents and gifts, assertively live out our purpose, AND also do it with humility, grace, and authenticity.

Brutal, radical honesty is required to both overcome our own personal darkness, our corporate struggles and questions, as well as embrace all of the goodness God has placed in our lives.

My hope is that seeing time and again this honesty reflected in scripture is incredibly encouraging. In every situation we see God's people engaging this unfiltered reflection, searching, and acceptance the result ultimately turns out for the best.

Peter is an amazing apostle. Paul is an amazing apostle. David is a King after God's own heart. Moses is the great deliverer of Israel. Jesus is the redeemer of all humanity and creation.

The path to truth, to our greatest transformation, and to the answers to some of our most difficult questions lies in unfettered honesty with ourselves and with God. According to 1 John it seems that the path to the Kingdom of God requires the same.

To finish I will share something of my "vacation" over Christmas and New Year's. As 2024 drew to a close I was acutely aware that 2025 is a pivotal year for us a congregation. It will require focus, sacrifice, work, change, and this kind of honesty.

I also knew that I needed to get myself focused and right in the heart and the mind to be of any use to you as we forge ahead together. Those two weeks were filled with a lot of honesty. A lot of soul searching. A lot of coming to grips with my own baggage and faults. It was also coming to grips with what God has blessed me with to offer into the world. The time was work, and I believe Em will back me when I say that. Here's what I gained.

First I gained freedom. Facing myself head on I lost the tension that comes from hiding from myself. In owning my own faults and failings it freed me to stop thinking I have to, or even have the potential to, figure everything out on my own.

With all of this came answers I'd been missing or avoiding and it led me to find the courage to bring people on board for support, strength, and guidance.

I will share that I've realized that the process isn't once and done. It's ongoing and some days it can be draining.

I can also say with confidence that through it I believe God has spoken a new sense of focus, peace, freedom, and strength that I haven't felt in some time.

The stories we read in scripture aren't just for there and then. They aren't necessarily carbon copied here and now. When was the last time you were swallowed by a giant fish or were hangry and saw a bed sheet dropping from the sky filled with food you'd sworn off?

The stories do show us how the people of God dealt with their own questions, their own fears, their own strengths, their own callings, and more. And how they dealt with them in connection and relation to God.

Join me in making this year a year of radical honesty. Honesty that is also laced with grace, kindness, and spurs us on to the kind of work that will both grow our congregation and impact our community in new and powerful ways. We've seen how it works in the lives of believers gone by in scripture. I share with you my own perspective just to encourage you that it still works today. The potential for a brave new adventure of faith is in front of all of us this year. Our task is to pursue it and along the way invite new people to join us.

BIBLE STUDY 2 Samuel 6

Chapter 6 of 2 Samuel puts a spiritual cap on David solidifying his reign over Israel. To this point we've seen it communicated almost summarily how David is ushered in joyfully as King by all of Israel, he establishes Israel as a nation among the other nations through initiating trade, a political center is secured in Jerusalem which is also a holy site, and the pestering Philistines are now largely neutralized. What Saul couldn't do David has.

Saul had also failed to keep God front and center of his reign. The ark, a mighty symbol of God, had been perhaps forgotten or at least just left to sit in the town where Saul deposited it after they reclaimed it from the Philistines long ago. We haven't heard much chatter about it at all. When Saul went to battle as king with the exception of one or two fights early on, no mention is made of the ark going before Israel. David is rectifying this at least in terms of prominence. His desire is to bring the ark to Jerusalem. The meaning is that all Israel will once again know that God is at the center of the nation and the king submits himself to God's authority.

As they are bringing the ark to Jerusalem a disturbing incident occurs. When the animals pulling the ark stumble, Uzzah reaches out and steadies the ark with his hand, preventing a fall. Immediately God strike him down for this affront. It reads that the act is "irreverent".

This is unsettling to many. It's unsettling for certain to David. David is outright angry with God. The punishment does not seem to fit the crime. Uzzah is doing what any of us might. This object of tremendous value and symbolism is about to be defiled by falling and touching the ground. What if it breaks? The contents are precious. What if they are scattered on the ground? Surely sparing the ark from this possibility is the opposite of irreverent.

Speculation may be made about Uzzah. Was it something about him that was problematic? Nothing in the passage suggests this. Any speculation about Uzzah's inadequacy is just that, speculation.

Why would this be included in this writing? Perhaps the writer simply wanted to remind Israel of the sovereignty of God's instructions? The order generation upon generation prior was that no one was to touch the ark or death would be the penalty. The ark is being returned to prominence, and the king submitting to God. Is the author driving home the importance to a people who has been exiled that their God is to be honored no matter what? After all, the sin that brought about their punishment was unfaithfulness. It is important to remember that this was written by a writer during the Babylonian exile with not only the purpose of communicating history, but honoring the building of a nation, bringing hope, and communicating theology to some extent.

We don't have an answer for the question that seems satisfactory to the frustration many share of this story that goes hand in hand with the frustration of David.

Pay attention to David's response. For many the idea of being angry at God or doubting is a cardinal sin. David here is a picture of both. God does not punish him for it. It is recorded, not criticized. We are allowed to be confused, frustrated, and uncertain even at God. God is big enough to handle our issues.

David drops the ark off with a man named Obed-Edom rather than bring it to Jerusalem. He leaves it there for three months. He questions why he was ever moved for the ark to become his responsibility. It doesn't give specifics but I think we can make some educated guesses based on what we know of human sensibilities.

This object now has demonstrated terrifying power. He might also see it as fickle, dealing out overly harsh judgment against people who might be simply trying to do the right thing. Or in Uzzah's case simply doing what is reflexive. Can he trust it? Has he brought something that even an honest mistake could bring about some terribly calamity on himself or all Israel? David doesn't seem so certain about it. Can we blame him?

As with so many things time proves out what is what. Once again, we do well to take this lesson. There is nothing wrong with giving time to sort out the quality of circumstances or factors when making a large decision. Paul in the New Testament even tells us to "prove all things and hold fast to that which is good." David is suspicious, and he proves out the ark. Though I wonder if Obed-Edom

had any sense that he was a “guinea pig” of sorts.

The household where the ark rested was blessed abundantly. David hears about it and his mind changes. Perhaps this thing is good after all. He returns to the ark and brings it into Jerusalem with great fanfare. He honors it with sacrifice and the image is of a mighty parade followed by treats for all who were present to witness it.

David’s dancing has been talked discussed by many over many years. What did it look like? Whatever it was it was a spectacle to behold. While we are told he wore an ephod, his wife Michal’s reaction suggests that it may not have been covering his body to conceal all that, let’s just say, ought to be concealed. She thinks he is debasing himself, and in front of common “slave girls” at that.

Michal is not participating in the celebration. She is watching it unfold with bitterness and anger. David comes home to bless his family and he runs into a bit of a buzzsaw. Michal is there, waiting to give him the business about his display. She is unhappy.

Before being too harsh with her, let’s consider her story. She once loved David when Saul gave her to him as a wife. There is no record of David loving her in return. When David is on the run Saul uses her as a tool for his purposes a second time. The first time was when he used her to bait David into his presence for opportunity to kill him. Then to ensure his bloodline won’t be sullied by David he takes her and marries her off to another man. One might presume she was in a happy marriage at that point as when she is then torn from that husband at David’s command to return her to him the husband follows her weeping in sorrow because of his love for her. David didn’t seem so interested in Michal as in solidifying his political influence by once again having a spouse tied to the bloodline of the first king of Israel. Michal has been a pawn jerked back and forth between Saul and David.

She has every reason to take issue with David. Perhaps she was harsh in the delivery of her criticism. Perhaps being the daughter of the king for a time she developed her own sense of decorum. Regardless, her angst towards David doesn’t come from nowhere.

David responds harshly on his own behalf. “Well God chose me over your dad didn’t he?!” That had to cut. It sounds almost like a grown up version of a child’s “neener neener” on the playground. He then shares what likely puts his actions in perspective of where his heart lies with God. Whatever he did, shameful or no, came from his passion to worship God. When he is moved to celebrate and honor God he will do it however his passion leads him and if that means being even more shameful than she thinks he has already acted. David’s allegiance above all is to God, not her or anyone else. And oh, by the way, he reminds her that even those slave girls will honor him for his zeal for God.

The chapter ends with telling us the Michal bore no children. It’s a single line. Why? There are several possibilities.

Some might suggest that God was punishing her for her insolence towards David. If we’re being fair, she had been mistreated far above and beyond just a momentary fit of anger that led to a domestic spat. David had plenty of faults himself through the prior situations revealed in 1 Samuel. Slaughtering men, women, and children to cover up his thieving raids comes to mind. Still, the sense of someone being made barren as a consequence isn’t without other instances in the Old Testament.

Perhaps David never loved her and after this outburst wanted nothing to do with her. He had other wives and concubines that would bear him children. Michal has served her purpose politically so her usefulness was complete. No need to use her any further.

Perhaps Michal decided she wanted nothing to do with David at this point. While it would be out of the ordinary, in the story of Esther we at least see another instance of a woman standing up to her husband. Queen Vashti refuses to come to the king when summoned to a party to be shown off. She is rejected and a new queen sought.

Maybe there was mutual disdain between the two.

At the end of the day anything we suggest is simply a suggestion here. Scripture is silent about why Michal didn’t bear and children. Fun as it might be to guess, there is one thing that is absolutely certain and likely why this detail is included.

Michal is the only chance for Saul’s bloodline to continue on the royal throne. God had said that

Saul's line would never again be in that line of kings. This consequence is now officially fulfilled with Saul's daughter being childless.

We've seen this before with the author of 1 and 2 Samuel. A prophecy is made or punishment decreed by God. Preserving God's faithfulness to God's word, the writer takes care to give us those instances of completion. We may not connect them ourselves right away, but that attention to detail is important to a people reading this story in exile. If God says it God will perform it.