

FEB 2, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

January 26 sermon— “Want or Need”

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5:8-10, Jeremiah 23:30-40

This week we continue what isn't so much a series thematically, but the messages do interconnect. We began the year acknowledging that answers to questions we can't find and struggles we can't overcome may well have only one solution. That solution is spiritual and found in connection with God. Then to seek those things in earnestness and be available for the most real answers from God we must have a radical, uncomfortable, sometimes ugly honesty with ourselves and with God about what's going on. Last week we considered the role of rules in our faith. Are they barriers that keep people away from Jesus, or are they guidance to help us on our way towards living into the image of Jesus, inviting all on the journey with us?

Today we are going to look at a necessity to see those expectations, those rules in their most genuine light and reality. It begins with asking the question of “what do I want?” and “what do I need?” Specifically it's these questions in regards to how we understand scripture.

The Old Testament today has a lot to share with us about where interpretation can get twisted. It was one of the great problems with Israel in fact.

On the plus side, we have our passage from Nehemiah. It shows us an ideal.

The background of all of this is very important. Judah had been in exile in Babylon. Unlike Israel with the Assyrians, Judah was eventually allowed to return to their homeland. Nehemiah was one of the men who returned with the mission and even support to rebuild the physical structures of Jerusalem. Ezra was the priest credited with rebuilding the spiritual center of the people.

This is the scene here. Ezra is reading the Law to the people and they are excited about it. There is reverence, awe, and celebration. The Levites on hand are there to explain the Law to the people to ensure that they understand it, and apparently they do a good job of it. There is a very real desire not just to hear the Word of God, but to truly grasp it. They want to know what it really says.

Why?

They want to know because it was failure to follow God's Word that sent them into exile to begin with. They have been given a new lease and don't want to waste it. The mistake of the past was having the Word of God, but allowing themselves to be misled into understanding what it says. The beginning of the fall of God's people always seemed to be falling away from the Word of God.

This was the scene in Jeremiah. I encourage you to read all of chapter 23 on your own if you want to get a full sense of this message. The verses read are a flavor of the chapter. Prior there is great warning to the priests and prophets because they have stopped speaking the true Word of God. They've offered guidance but it has been their own, not God's. The result is that all those who followed them would be punished, and the people that their false message had scattered would be brought back together.

Everything was “going fine” following the false prophets and priests until it wasn't. Then they were carted off to exile. Who returned in Nehemiah? The ones who stood before Ezra eager to know the genuine word of God and follow it.

According to Jeremiah 23 the problematic teaching of the priests and prophets drove away those actually wanting God and held near those who were concerned only with what tickled their ears and appealed to self.

I heard an interesting way of putting this given the way scripture describes God's issue with the people. It wasn't that they weren't doing the “performative” works of the Law. This means that they were doing actions that looked like they were faithful. They said their prayers and made their sacrifices. What they didn't do was the important things that genuine faith and the Law required. They didn't treat one another correctly. They did the external stuff but stopped holding one another with compassion in their hearts. The result is well written multiple times in the prophets that this led to abusing

one another, to failing to care for those in need, to a lack of mercy, and to letting justice go by the wayside.

Jesus continues this criticism when He looks at the priests and teachers and says “you give a tenth of your dill leaves but neglect the weightier aspects of the Law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness.” Interestingly this harsh Old Testament criticism comes in Jeremiah 23, Jesus’ criticism is in the 23rd chapter of Matthew.

Why would this happen?

The answer is simple. Self-interest. Tell the king what he wants to hear and receive all the perks that go along with it. Get the status and goodies. Tell the influential in Israel and Judah what they want to hear and get the status and goodies. It’s nice to feel like you have a voice that matters to the powerful. The temptation to tell them what appeals to their own interests is God’s will is strong. Many fell into it.

The price was paid on the backs of the people. Ultimately the punishment was severe.

When people were asked what the Word of God was, of course they would be expected to parrot those prophets and priests favorable to the king. God is telling them not to do this. Don’t align themselves with false words from God.

Some time ago we considered the difference in prophets of that day. There were central and peripheral. The central were the ones close to the throne and typically dishonest in what they claimed to be messages from God. The peripheral were the ones like Jeremiah. They told it true and were punished, jailed, abused, and sometimes killed for their trouble because it didn’t make the king and his cronies feel good about themselves.

In this is a powerful lesson for us today. Last week we talked about evaluating our rules. What are they? Why do they exist? Do they serve God? Are they barriers to new followers or invitations for imperfect to walk with imperfect striving to be more like Jesus?

How much messaging today is genuine and how much is off base but couched in the “performative” acts of “worship”?

One sign that we have some digging to do is the reason we see people bounce from church to church. “I don’t like what I’m hearing”. So what do I do? I go try to find some place that I DO like what I’m hearing. I go find some place that agrees with what I already believe. There are so many different messages coming out of pulpits around the world every week that we can pick from the buffet whatever we like. Not everything we hear or choose is truly God’s Word. All interpretations are not created equal I’m sorry to say.

When I find a comfortable spot to land, in instances where I’m on point this isn’t bad. In the places where my beliefs are off base it’s a problem. I’m falling into the same trap they did in Jeremiah’s day.

It’s the question “what do I want?” rather than “what do I need?” I want to think I’m right. I want to think I’ve got it all figured out. I need to recognize that I still have room to grow and learn and become more like Jesus. This means that I need to hear uncomfortable things that challenge me where I’m weak and mistaken.

I need to see scripture for what it really says, not for what I want it to say.

This is the issue.

When we’ve been indoctrinated and told what the Bible says this is how we tend to approach our reading. We have pre-drawn assumptions of what is and is not “in the Bible”. That means when I read, I read scripture in such a way that it HAS to support what I already believe. I see what I want to see. I see what I’ve been told I’m supposed to see. That doesn’t always lead me to honest interpretation of what scripture is actually saying. It also leads me to ignore or minimize passages that go against what I’m supposed to think about scripture.

Voices, no matter how well intentioned, that have instilled in us our faith can mislead. As our faith matures it’s our work to unpack scripture with more discerning eyes than perhaps we had in younger years when our faith was more about trusting those telling us what scripture means than discovering

the meaning for ourselves.

I say this from personal experience even now. I'll be working on a message or a Bible study and the lesson will be tracking a particular way. Over the years I think I've come to have a fair sense of what scripture says at least in terms of knowing certain passages. So when I'm working things through in my heart and mind those verses are strong at work forming the content of what I'm going to say.

Then every now and again I open that Bible and read and re-read familiar passages. I realize that it doesn't say what I thought it said. The words on the page don't match the words in my head. The meaning of the words because I'd been taught it in the context of a verse or two don't mean what I'd found in the context of the surrounding verses, or the chapter, or the book of the Bible. They don't mean what I thought when diving deeper and seeing the English isn't the best communication of the Hebrew or Greek, or getting a background behind why the words were written and to whom they were written.

So I have a choice. Hang on to what I thought I knew or adjust what I am understanding to what the scripture is actually saying. I hope you know that every time this happens I rework the message to the scripture. Not rework the scripture to support my message. In places where something is unclear or unsaid you hear me saying things like "now this is my speculation but I think it tracks".

I'm going to have us do an exercise here to make the point. It might blow up in my face, but I hope it's an illustration that will make the point without tap dancing too terribly hard on toes.

I'm going to ask some questions about some passages familiar to many of you. If you've moved beyond the common assumption, I'm certain you'll relate to the point. I had a different example at first then I heard a preacher preach these passages and the light bulb went on.

Ezekiel

Isaiah

Genesis

The thing is that you don't need these passages to talk about the devil. There's plenty in the New Testament that refers to the devil without contriving something from these passages that either clearly designate the target of the words other than Satan or don't specify who the character is at all. Yet most of us were taught that these passages refer to Satan. They don't. So why force it?

As with anything, however, at the end of the day all of us have to decide what we're going to do with what we hear or learn. We can believe it or not. Many would hear this message, see what I'm pointing out in scripture and reject what I'm saying. "I still think this is about the devil." That's fine. That's anyone's right.

One of the quick responses is often "well this has a dual meaning." That's convenient, but scripture never claims this is the case. It says what it says and doesn't go beyond what we just read on the page. Once seen, though, it can't be unseen. And if I reject it in favor of my own belief I at least have to own that. And then I should be asking the question of why I reject what is actually said in the scripture for what I've been told to think it says.

There are far weightier things at hand than this set of verses this morning. Those are better left for more discussion and conversation rather than this one way communication.

I suppose what I'm sharing today is something that I personally have to do day in and day out.

Do we claim to hold scripture high in regard and reverence? Yes. Do we claim that our beliefs, values, faith, and understanding of what is correct are rooted in scripture? Yes.

Then let's be certain that what we are saying and believing is really what the Bible says. I hear that all the time. "Well the Bible says...." And so often it doesn't. Or if the words quoted exist in the Bible, the words have been cherry picked, ignored the rest of the Bible, or been reworked in meaning to support an already assumed tradition or idea.

There are so many who are looking for Jesus today. The sad thing is that too many times they have also gone into communities of faith where scripture hasn't been allowed to speak for itself. Never does anyone admit to that. Preachers and teachers typically don't begin a lesson with "I know the Bible

says such and such, but we're going to ignore that. Listen to what I'm telling you instead."

But those who are looking often know enough about Jesus to spot when something is "off". For many it's in how they are treated or things they overhear that are strikingly cruel and unChristlike. Just because someone doesn't go to church or believe as we do doesn't mean they haven't read the Bible. When they do it's without the voices telling them what to believe about it. They may be reading it with more objective eyes than we do.

One of the things that I love about the way the United Methodist Church calls upon us to do our theology is that it takes into account factors experience, tradition, and reason. At the center of all of it, at the foundation, however, is scripture. Scripture is the base for our faith.

Most Christians would agree with this. Through centuries on centuries voices have entered in every age that have added their own spins and twists to influence towards their way of seeing scripture. Some have been incredibly wise and insightful. Others have been misguided at best and intentionally dishonest at worst.

As Christianity tries to regain some sense of footing moving into the future, one of the first things that needs to happen is to get back to the scriptures and let the scriptures speak for themselves. Believers must be willing to do the work of making belief congruent when we claim that scripture leads us to a unified sense of God and faith.

I encourage us to take time to unpack our own personal senses of faith as it leans on the Bible. When two things can't hold together, go to scripture and find the truth. Here's an example. We hear people say that "everything is God's will." The same will say that "it isn't God's will that we sin." Those two do not hold together. Then the work is to go to scripture to understand why and how our faith is stronger for having come to understand why.

The more we understand what scripture is really getting at the stronger our faith. The stronger our witness. The greater our ability to understand those who question inconsistencies in statements of faith. In the end the better we can help those who want to follow Jesus but have trouble because of mistaken views they have of scripture to answer their misgivings. And where does this lead? We pray it leads to new souls coming to embrace the grace, love, and mercy of Christ that we do. Not only embrace it, but live it and be one more agent of God for the transformation of the world.

BIBLE STUDY 2 Samuel 8

Chapter 8 I believe can be summed up in two terms: expansion and consolidation. In short, David is embattled with multiple nations for the first and largest portion of the chapter and at the end we see the formation of what we might call an administration.

After defeating the Philistines again he turns to Moab. This is a passage worth noting. Moab was where David's family found safe harbor while he was running from Saul. We'll see shortly a reason David would have attacked them, though it is a bit of a head scratcher why he would turn on a place that was a source of safety and security to him prior.

David's means of deciding who of the Moabites would be spared and who would be executed is quite strange. There is really no equivalent to this method elsewhere in scripture. We don't know the length of the "cord". We don't know if it was head to foot, torso, other otherwise. Just that one length meant spared and two meant dead.

In our Wednesday group we speculated that perhaps it was a means of ascertaining age. Do away with the adults who would pose a potential future threat but keep the children. Why keep the children? There is no sense that they would do such a thing out of a general kindness. After all David has already demonstrated that he is willing to kill man, woman, and child. Perhaps they would work well as slaves.

This led to the question of whether or not it was acceptable to enslave children as a fortune of war. Is it acceptable to enslave children at all? Is slavery acceptable? Of course our answer was "no", however it brings into stark reality that slavery wasn't frowned upon in the Old Testament, in fact there were laws to guide how a slave was to be treated(including instructions on how severely a slave could be

beaten). In the New Testament the assumption was that slavery was just a natural course of life and instructions were given to both slave and master.

This would be why scripture was able to be used in the south in America to promote and even condone the practice of slavery. On the other hand, of course we have Jesus' words to treat others as we'd like to be treated and love our neighbor as ourself. It isn't too far a stretch to take this to stand Biblically against slavery. The reality though is that scripture never condemns the practice. Culturally it was understood to be just part of the natural pecking order.

It brings into conversation that there are things that we consider sinful today that scripture did not. There are also things scripture considers sinful that we do not. There is a cultural element we have to own in interpreting the Bible because of this. It's uncomfortable to many who have staunch belief because then it brings up the question of what is and is not a cultural interpretation. This makes it very hard to control another person's narrative and when we believe eternity to be at stake such flexibility can be frightening.

If nothing else, perhaps this reminds us to take interpretation seriously, honestly, and to genuinely seek God over self. At the same time it should cultivate grace amidst differences in understanding if we are all genuinely seeking Christ.

Back to the subject at hand there is something notably missing in the listing of David's battles which casts us back to Moab. There is no reason given. Israel wasn't under attack, at least according to scripture. What this indicates is David engaging in expansion. He is broadening the territory over which he rules. As with his treatment of the Moabites, nothing seems to be wrong with this in God's eyes. In fact it tells us that God was at work blessing David's endeavors. This kind of action was part and parcel to kings and kingdoms in this era and area of the world.

Again casting forward to today, this kind of action seems more frowned upon. The age of imperialism has drawn to a close and internationally there is an overall agreement that countries are sovereign and aggression in the form of conquest is frowned upon. The aggression from Russia towards Ukraine is a case study in how this is bearing out in our own time. In terms of Godliness, Christian or not, the world seems to have come to a conclusion that stability preserving life and peace is preferable to imperial instability that promotes ongoing and uncertain war.

Mentalities shift.

As the chapter draws to a close we see a listing of officials in David's administration. Israel now has a standing army. This is different and more cohesive than a loose confederation of tribes each with their own sensibilities and fighting forces. There are priests to guide the nation theologically. There is a "recorder" to keep tabs on what is decided and done. There is a secretary likely more like a secretary of state with such responsibilities. David's sons are listed as "priests". This could also mean high officials to assist in governance. It could also point to the priestly role not being limited to Levites, but could also be appointed by the king.

The overseer of the Cherethites and Pelethites is something uncommon to our senses of political officials. These two groups were likely mercenaries. We're not accustomed to this kind of position, at least not publicly stated and in scripture!

The statement that David ruled all Israel with Justice and equity is an exclamation point that, as we've seen forming, Israel is now a unified nation. They are on the world stage with a strong king, defined and expanding territory(at the moment), an army for defense, and a structure in place for governance. David has put Israel on the map as never before.