

FEBRUARY 9, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

February 9 sermon— “All You Need Is...”

Romans 8: 31-39, 1 Peter 4: 7-9, Hebrews 12: 3-7

The past weeks have been involved in our messages. Today we are going to be very direct as we prepare for a congregational meeting following worship. We are considering a foundation of our faith that literally undergirds and should infuse everything we believe, do, and say as people of faith. What is this monumental idea that represents our God, Savior, and guiding Spirit? The Beatles wrote a song about it. All you need is....?

Love

In our world today embodying love is critical. Perhaps even moreso is to embody it not with excuses and limitations as the world around us would encourage. We embody it in accordance with God revealed in Jesus. How did He teach? What did He live out personally?

Some of what we'll consider today is familiar to many of you. Some you've heard recently from myself on a Sunday morning. Some might be a refresher. Whatever it is I hope we take from our message hope, assurance, comfort, and instruction.

1 John clearly tells us that God is love. This statement is made in the context of our call to love one another. The nature of God is love and we are called to do likewise.

If the nature of God is love, then all of scripture should be viewed in this light. I want to encourage all of us that when we look at scripture to be more inclined to ask questions than to make excuses when things don't seem to line up with a God whose nature is love.

We'll talk a little about this in the meeting after, but for now keep in mind that asking questions of interpretation of scripture isn't questioning the validity of scripture. It is recognizing that something isn't ringing correctly and so we question the interpretation and why it doesn't align with the God we know as a God of love.

Romans 8 is familiar. It is comforting, hopeful, and assuring. There is no place that God's love won't reach us. There is nowhere that God isn't searching us out. I suggest that this reach isn't merely physical. It is spiritual. No matter how far we run from God, God's love is always desiring us and wanting us to return.

Isn't this one of the main points of the story of the prodigal son? The child takes everything he can from the father and runs off, squandering it all. When he returns humbled and asking for mercy the father grants it immediately and readily. The child doesn't even make it to the door before the father rushes out to meet him. The father has been looking for the child, hoping for a return and can't wait to welcome him with open arms and celebration. We are all that child.. God is always the Father.

Today we celebrate communion. Scripture asks “what greater love is there than one who lays their life down for a friend?” There is none. Jesus lays His down for us all. Willing and gracious Jesus is executed sacrificially. This is no ordinary love that overlooks because of superficial reasons. This is a love that is supernatural. It is a love that we are called to ourselves.

1 John also reminds us that we love because God first loved us. Who has God loved? Everyone. That includes you and me. Notice, God loved FIRST. God didn't wait for us to make the first move, the love was there from the start. That love poured into us is love just waiting for a response. That response? Pour it out to those around us. No worries, God will refill us. How much greater does this make the commands of Jesus upon which all the prophets and the Law hang? “Love God and love one another.”

God's love isn't withheld. It is freely given.

This idea of the Law and the prophets all resting in our love of God and loving each other is important. It is the summation of the message of an entire Testament of the Bible, the Old. Whatever we read, the intent is to promote love of God and love of others. To read anything less into them is to miss the point given by Jesus Himself.

Which brings us to our passage that God disciplines those that God loves. No question. To allow those that we love to continue destructive and problematic values and ways isn't loving at all. We do what we can to direct them properly. If the discipline is truly loving, there is one desired outcome. We want to see a positive change. That's it. We're not interested in punishment for punishment's sake. We are wanting to see those we love become their best selves.

So often people want to see major accidents, disasters, tragedies, illnesses, etc. as discipline from God. They might be, but often not in the whammy way people want to ascribe them. It happens all the time that something bad happens and people want to put the blame on an individual or group of individuals bringing down God's judgment. Here's the problem:

We're not God. God's judgment is perfect, ours isn't. How God disciplines is God and God alone, and we know that ultimately it is just, fair, and right. Our sense of things is very often skewed when we proclaim God's hand of wrath.

This said, the way God has ordered the lives of humans has all kinds of accountability and discipline. We often call them natural consequences. The hope is that when what we say or do brings out hurt or harm to another, the resulting consequence that comes to us will teach us to act more loving, and to seek God for the strength to do so.

This, however, is the danger of us ascribing God to things. There are illnesses I might contract because of my choices. There are those same illnesses I might contract because of genetics or being wrong place wrong time. Two very different reasons for the same affliction. In another, God knows far more than I what brings about hardship and loss.

For the sense of love and that not everyone learns consider Jonah. Why did God send Jonah to Nineveh? Out of love for the Ninevites that yielded change and life for the citizens of that city. It wasn't just about Nineveh. God was trying to teach Jonah a lesson in loving enemies, grace, and seeing the worth of all. So He sends him to those Jonah hates. Sadly at the end of the book Jonah still hasn't learned the lesson. What about us? Are we willing to go to those we've been taught to despise and allow God to change our hearts to hearts of love and grace?

I hear folks use this sense of discipline to harangue people they think are doing something wrong. "The loving thing is to tell them." There are considerations with that. First, am I doing it truly out of love? Is my desire because I care enough to want to see what's best for the other? Or is it out of offense, or because it's a pet peeve of mine? Or is it a desire to have superiority or power over another? Do I have the quality of relationship that if I say something it will help? Or will it actually do more harm than good?

These are all questions born out of love. Perhaps the biggest thing to weigh and weight honestly is if I'm considering the golden rule. Is what I'm about to say or do the way I'd like to be treated were I in their shoes? That and that alone I believe would cut off a lot of hurtful and to be frank inaccurate criticisms that people level out of lots of reasons, but love isn't one of them.

This golden rule is at the heart of so much love. We want to be treated a particular way. For me I'd like to be treated with kindness, grace, mercy, and love. So it's my job to extend that to others.

When we read Matthew 25, we see needs listed that we are called to meet in others. How we handle this has a lot to do with how we are received by God. Why? Because anything we do or neglect to do to another we have done to Jesus. Jesus is everyone.

Does our love cause us to extend a supernatural grace to everyone, no matter whom? Do we set aside our world's rules in favor of ensuring that for our part everything we say and do is backed up and in the spirit of the love of Jesus?

A final scripture we heard today is that "love covers a multitude of sins". This is incredibly comforting. We know that God is love, and so we know that God is forgiving to an infinite extent and degree. We can also tell how much we are like God by the extent to which we can forgive others. Forgiveness is a necessary and natural extension of love if we claim to follow Jesus. We know that if another is truly showing Christlike love then we are safe with them because we can make mistakes without fear of retribution and condemnation.

Jesus is clear that people will see the evidence of our commitment to Him by our love. Love like His own.

A final word of love in action. Over and over again I have heard stories of how people change their ways. Many of them the average person of faith might look down upon or write off as a “lost cause”. Do you know what the answer has been almost exclusively for those that have changed? Someone loved them. Rather than being treated as second or third class, as an outsider, as “less than”, as too “far gone” to share company with they were met with understanding and grace where they were. That love, which included loving accountability, helped them move beyond their circumstance into something better, brighter, and closer to God.

This is the key to bringing others to the Kingdom of God. An open love that embraces the Golden Rule, loves God and the other, and fearlessly and unashamed embraces those that other Christians have cast aside.

Every hurting soul is seeking to be healed. At some point, that desire surfaces. The love of Christ freely received by us and celebrated is the key to that healing. As Jesus says, don't hide the light under a bushel. Shine and take it to the reaches of the community around us that need it the most.

BIBLE STUDY 2 Samuel 9

Chapter 9 is rather short. It's almost an interlude of sorts between David's battles for conquering additional territory and the next fight he will have on his hands. In summation, this chapter is very much about David's integrity and the value of covenant.

As David settles into a solid, stable kingship he remembers Saul's family. David's attentiveness to the family of the man who had tried to kill him and set him on the run for what must have felt like an eternity is rare, perhaps confusing, and intentional. Most intentional here is his relationship with Saul's son Jonathan.

David had made a covenant with Jonathan long ago that when he rose to power Jonathan's family would not be harmed or forgotten. It was not at all unusual for a new king to simply kill any rivals for the throne. Any in Saul's line would qualify for this. Jonathan wanted to make sure his family was safe and trusted David to make it so.

Here David calls upon one of Saul's chief servants to find out who might remain of Saul's line for him to honor. This is an strange chance for Ziba, the servant, to conduct himself in a way that both continues to honor his former master and present king. David is seeking his help in doing right by Saul's family, whom Ziba had served.

Of course the one remaining is Jonathan's son Mephibosheth. Repeatedly we are reminded of Mephibosheth's lameness. If nothing else this serves to let us know that in terms of any real threat to David, he poses none.

Keeping his vow to Jonathan, David restores all of Saul's land to Mephibosheth. The sense here is that David as the new king could have confiscated Saul's property. We don't know what Ziba, his family, and his fellow servants have been up to, but I think it can be assumed that as Saul's servants they may have been familiar with Saul's holdings. Who knows? They may have even still been living on the property.

The new master of the land is Saul's grandson. Ziba is ordered with a contingent of family and other servants to work the land for Mephibosheth. This task seems to be gladly accepted. It seems a rather nice arrangement. David has announced that Mephibosheth will be taken care of by David, "he will eat at my table." Thus he will be in Jerusalem leaving the servants free to do their work apart from the master.

The reason David gives for them working the land is to "provide for" Mephibosheth. Why if he's with David? Likely this is tied to the expectations of land owners, not dissimilar from today. It would have been expected to provide a portion or the king, a tax if you will. Mephibosheth might be taken care of by David, Jonathan's friend, but tax is still owed to the king just like anyone else.

Sharing this story gives us the sense that David here is still living into a very noble respect for past kings, country, and promises made to beloved friends. He didn't have to do this. No one knew about his arrangement with Jonathan that we know of. Such promises can be easily forgotten or dismissed, but not here.

When we think of David as a "man after God's own heart" perhaps this is part of where that comes from. In many ways David proves himself fallible and even ruthless, particularly when crossed or in battle. Despite this there is a heart there that when called to task is repentant, willing to listen to and follow God, and understands the notion of promise and covenant. We ourselves would do well to remember his example. Even Jesus says "let your yes be yes and no be no". In other words be people whose word is reliable.

In a world where loopholes are everywhere and promises are more "throw away" than sacred, trustworthiness is a commodity worth its weight in gold. It is also a mark of genuine faithfulness to God and following Jesus. Proverbs tells us that one of the things God hates is a "lying tongue". Our willingness to follow through on our word is a great elevation to our character, a gift to our friends, families and communities, and a testament to the genuineness and strength of our faith.