

MAR 9, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON March 2 - "Things That Last" 1 Corinthians 15:42-50, Isaiah 5:20-21, Luke 6:43-45

Today we are considering something that over the last couple weeks has surely been on many people's minds. On Thursday we had the service to celebrate Ruth Catlett's life. This past week Tony Waggoner's father passed away. Whenever we are faced with someone's life in this world coming to an end, there is a natural inclination to face up to our own mortality. What will my life after look like?

The question this essentially begs is "what lasts forever?"

There is a very base sense of faith that our spirit endures after this physical form gives out. Verse 50 of our Corinthians scripture bears this out. "flesh and blood can not inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the perishable." The verses prior are all about spirit vs. flesh. It's about what endures over what passes away.

While the notion that our spirit is what endures, there are other things to keep in mind. There is eternal value to what we do here in this world, and it's not just those things that pertain to us individually.

Faith that endures eternally is represented by more than just a statement of faith. It is represented by a transformed life. Over and over again Jesus tells us that what we do reveals the faith that we possess. We'll say more about that soon. The sense that I pray a prayer, make a prescribed confession of faith, and then I make it to heaven is mistaken. Words mean little if they are not an actual condition of the heart. And if they are a condition of the heart that will be evident from the lives we lead.

As you've heard me say often, works don't earn salvation. Works reveal whether we have been saved. So what endures? What endures here and what translates to God's eternal kingdom?

Jesus says to us to not store up treasure on earth where it can be destroyed and rot away. We know there is the reality that whatever we possess doesn't come with us. There is a country song about hearses not having trailers. There is the joke about the man who told his wife to put his valuables on the window ledge on the second floor so that when he died he could grab it on the way up to heaven. When he passed and the valuables remained the wife said "I knew I should have put them in the basement."

We recognize that material things don't make it with us, and even here in this world they will eventually get used up.

What lasts here in this world is how we treat one another. We can't say that the only thing that lasts here in this world is love. Hate, anger, abuse and all of those sorts of things linger in the hearts of the victims long after the perpetrator leaves this world. Anyone who has been mistreated and been to the funeral of their abuser understands this. In the same way the love we give, the kindness and compassion, also last in this world.

One leaves a wake of hurt and the need for healing that may or may not come. The other leaves a wake of healing, uplifting, confidence, and memories that carry the one who remains through harder times ahead.

That the way we treat one another shapes the way we treat one another is how the good and the bad can live beyond us generation after generation.

So what about eternity in God's kingdom?

In that case, the lasting and enduring is what we live and do that is in keeping with God's will in our lives. Paul talks about our work being tested and whatever isn't of God just burns up. This implies that even after we are redeemed, the works of our life carry over into reward. That reward is determined by faithful works.

The works and words are even more complicated than just the deed itself. Intention matters. Jesus talks about prayer, fasting, and giving, all things that are good. Even holy things like this can be done for selfish reasons. We want to be seen a certain way. When there is selfish intent whatever we get as a result here and now is the end of it. There is no eternal value.

The eternal value lies also in doing what we do because it is the product of the love in our hearts. It is

the product of our love of God and our love of neighbor. This is what God values. This is what remains.

Luke reminds us that good trees bear good fruit, and bad trees bad. Keep in mind that all of us have seen a piece of fruit that looks good, taken a bite and found it to be rotten on the inside. Satan is described as an angel of light, and so we need to have discernment. Just because something looks good doesn't mean it is.

Isaiah is congruent with this idea. "Woe to those who call good evil and evil good." People mix the two up all the time. The most damaging and saddening instances are when the evil, or the wrong, is painted over with a coat of spiritual language or holy context. Not only is that a deception of self by the one mixing it up, it also deceives others by luring them to see what could be potentially Godly in an ungodly light.

It takes what could have been imperishable, immortal, eternal and transforms it into something that dies in this life and potentially causes problems beyond ourselves and in the lives and faith of others. What God desires and what we strive for is to build lives that outlast our time in this world. Be the presence that showers Christ like kindness and love on those who are hurting and stepped on, inviting them to life and healing. Be the humble character that excels yet refuses to boast. Be the miracle of a transformed heart, loving those still struggling and inspiring them to transformation as well.

At the end of the day there is something God cares about much more than our jobs, whether or teams win a game, our politics, or our hobbies. God cares about how we conduct ourselves amongst all of the above and if we are truly and genuinely exuding the love of Jesus.

If we are, do we open our hearts to anyone who is not and desiring to experience what we have found? Will we walk with them?

How we live into this answers every question we need to know about what endures after we pass away. The content of our lives reveals the content of our hearts. "The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil, for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks."

How we live shows where we are bound when we die, and what will be waiting for us on the other side in terms of reward.

I'd like to finish by highlighting something from the movie we showed on Friday called "The Forge". I'll try not to give too much away in terms of spoilers.

Many might watch that movie and see it primarily as about the journey of the main character. A young man on his way to faith. I see it differently. Perhaps it's because of the meeting we're about to have after this service and what it means in terms of the calling of each and every one of us as a believer in Jesus.

I saw it as about the mentor of the main character. The movie plays things out in a rather ideal way. Most times things aren't quite as clean and simple as the script writes it. Still, the point is solid. The mentor has a deep and hard won faith. The circle of believers in the movie began with him. One at a time he found someone, mentored them, and encouraged them to pass it along. After 15 years the group was about 15 or so strong it seemed.

Here are some keys from the example:

He was intentional. He looked for an opportunity to help someone in need, took it, and invested in the relationship

It was about fostering relationship over time, not a shoot from the hip conversion and move along to the next target

What he imparted to others he lived out himself in every aspect of his life. He was the real deal walking the talk.

We find out lots about who the mentor is, what he's doing, and how he got where he is. Most of it we find out from other characters talking about him, not him bragging about himself.

I think it's more about the mentor because at the end of the movie is a call to action for those watching to, as scripture might say, "go and do likewise."

The call is to imitate the model of living faith in such a way as to intentionally invite others along the way. And it's not a daunting expectation of "converting" a ton of people all at once. It's about genuine living of faith and intentionally finding someone who is searching for all the goodness that faith brings with it.

If every person in every pew and watching from home found just one person to walk with in genuine, compassionate, Christ centered faith, how many people would be added to the Kingdom of God?

Our time is limited, each and every one of us. We do better investing it in living out the lives Jesus calls us to, loving those around us into His arms. Inviting them in all of their messiness to walk with us in all of our own.

Life lived this way takes care of what comes next. It ensures that what we build endures along with us eternally. It is the best guarantee of hearing God say the words "well done good and faithful servant."

BIBLE STUDY 2 Samuel 13

Chapter 13 is a troubling one. The incident described is dreadful. Why would the writer want to preserve such a terrible story? Several things come to mind. First, it is the catalyst for the words of Nathan's prophecy to come to pass in David's household. It is also critical in the story of kingly succession. In fact there is thinking that while the situation with Tamar instills a genuine hatred in Absalom for his brother, it may have been his intent all along to kill Amnon in order to be the next king. Amnon was the eldest, Absalom the next. It is entirely in the realm of possibility for an ambitious Absalom to have plans for the throne.

Amnon's intentions for his half sister Tamar quickly become evident. At first he is painted as love-sick. In short order we see he is lustsick. One of the disturbing aspects of this story is that the woman he lusts after is his half-sister. This smacks of incest and to us is unthinkable. We don't know at that time that this was the case. Marrying within a family may not have been taboo as it is now. This is another situation where we can do a both/and. We honor that this relationship is incorrect, and we also recognize that they may not have agreed.

Jonadab enters as a character in the story. He is the one who gives Amnon the idea of how to make his desire for Tamar known. We do not know that Jonadab had any sense that Amnon had intentions to rape Tamar. This is important as we consider Jonadab and translates into present day situations and relationships.

It's easy to read Jonadab in a bad light because of what happened using his advice. In truth most of us have done or approved of the same kind of thing he worked out for Amnon. Someone is interested in another and frustrated because he/she can't seem to find the nerve or idea of how to break the ice to get a conversation started or ask the person on a date. A friend offers advice or a plan as to how to do so. Sometimes it works and a date is secured, other times it doesn't. Typically it doesn't end as it did with Amnon.

The point being that Jonadab may have been acting in innocence with no inkling that what he could have intended as a conversation would turn so horribly wrong.

A detail that adds to the need for a plan to strike up a conversation is Tamar's virginal status and royal parentage. It was common for virgins in the royal court to be under a special watch to keep their virginity intact. This would make it more difficult to have a private conversation.

Amnon's scheme works and Tamar comes to him to care for him in his fake illness. The scene turns aggressive and violent. The language in translation doesn't do full justice to the moment. There is a not subtle reflection of David's sin with Bathsheba. The more powerful takes the less. David as king isn't recorded as having to physically coerce Bathsheba, yet the power difference between them is no less violent in its result. Amnon doesn't have kingly authority and physically forces himself.

Tamar is an impressive woman. Let's not mince words that she is absolutely a victim here. Even as a victim, she doesn't portray as one. She conducts herself with a control, a strength, and a wit that is superhuman.

As Amnon seizes her and is clearly out of control, Tamar is a picture of composure. She tries to verbally convince her brother to stop what he is about to do. She communicates that to do this would put her in a position where her life would be ruined. To lose her virginity is to lose her future. She would be unmarriageable and left to most likely a future of shame and poverty. She appeals to his self-interest. To do this to his sister, particularly since they are a high profile family, would certainly destroy his own reputation. Finally she offers that David would happily give her in marriage to Amnon if he just asked.

Tamar is applying every logical, cultural angle to stop Amnon from what he is about to do. In all of it, she is preserving not just her own safety, but the family honor. This would be a scandal of epic proportions.

Amnon doesn't listen.

Immediately after he forces himself on her he kicks her out in a moment of pure hatred. Did he hate her? Or did he hate himself? Her presence was a clear reminder of the sin he'd just committed. The shame on his family was directly in his face. What do we do when we are in the presence of something that reminds us of unbearable disgrace? We leave or get rid of it.

Tamar continues even in the wake of being violated to try and be a voice of reason. I can't imagine having her composure after being not just raped, but by her brother. She begs him not to put her out. "The shame would be even greater". Why? Amnon could still "make it right". Not unlike Boaz immediately going to secure marriage with Ruth after the night on the threshing floor, Amnon could hastily go to David and request a wedding. It wasn't then as it is today where they needed a full year to plan. They could get married quickly without incident or question.

Tamar is still trying to preserve the family honor. Amnon is not having it. And Tamar is not going to keep it under wraps. She has given him the chance to preserve the family honor, to preserve her own dignity and future, and spare himself disgrace. He has refused twice. Tamar makes a public spectacle by tearing her royal, virginal robe and spreading ashes on her head. She will not be quiet about this. We don't hear a tremendous amount about Tamar after this. We don't typically hear her mentioned in the stories of legendary, impressive women of faith. In her victimhood Tamar displays a constitution that is rare and admirable. Not only is she composed and resolved in the midst of terror and being victimized, she also has the strength to not just knuckle under after the incident. Whatever might happen, what has occurred is wrong and if Amnon won't do something to handle it, she will not spare him some measure of accountability.

Absalom is furious. David is angry but refuses to act. Why would David just let this horrible offense pass? Perhaps he sees in Amnon a reflection of himself. How can he hold Amnon accountable without feeling like a hypocrite? The punishment for Amnon should be death, how can he kill his firstborn and heir? David is paralyzed, and Amnon and his family will pay the price. David's guilt will bear more consequence than just the death of his child with Bathsheba. Now it will bear the death of his eldest.

Unresolved guilt is a cancer. It clouds judgment. In this case it prevents David from rendering some kind of accountability. Amnon getting away with no consequence means that if David won't do it, Absalom will.

When Tamar is described as a "desolate" woman this is not just a state of emotional sadness. This encompasses all of what it means for her to have been violated. It describes the future, hopeless condition of her life. Absalom takes her in and cares for her. His response "don't take it to heart" seems to be quite minimal given the circumstance. We don't know how to interpret this. Given his taking her in it may indicate that he is genuinely trying to console her. On the other hand, if his intentions are also to take the throne from Amnon and this was in his heart all along, it might belie something more selfish and callous. It might be a slim consolation with a preoccupation to what he would do next to both get the throne and avenge his sister.

Unresolved anger always takes its toll. A full two years pass with Absalom having nothing to do with Amnon. We find out later from Jonadab that this whole time Absalom has been plotting to kill

Amnon. It stands to reason that day by day the hatred in Absalom's heart would have been growing. Keep in mind that these characters are people, with all of the emotion that goes along with being human.

The moment comes when Absalom is getting ready to shear his sheep. Remember that Nabal, whose name means fool or stupid, also had a sheepshearing incident where he offended David greatly. David was going to kill all of Nabal's male servants until Abigail waved him off. Something stupid was going to happen with that shearing. Something stupid is about to happen with the sheep shearing here.

It's unclear if Absalom initially planned this event to kill Amnon or if it was an opportunity seized. Inviting David at first would seem to indicate he wasn't planning the murder at first. When David refuses to come, it's then that he asks for Amnon to come. David's question of "why?" shows us that he's suspicious but Absalom smooths that over by inviting all of his brothers. After all, if he's inviting them all, not inviting Amnon would be weird. Right?

Absalom has Amnon killed in front of all of his brothers, who rightly flee. If Amnon's just been taken out, are they next? Fear in that moment when an heir to the throne begins taking out challengers is the only response.

David gets bad information that all of them are dead. This is where we learn from Jonadab that Absalom has been plotting this for years. His response to David is exactly Absalom's to Tamar. "Don't let this trouble your heart". After all, it's only one son, not all of them. If this is a slim consolation and a bit callous it seems to be a general part of David's household.

Absalom runs, as one would. He is gone for three years. It is vague about which son David is mourning. The obvious choice would be the murdered Amnon. The writing of the story leaves it up in the air that since David's heart "longed" for Absalom that he could have been mourning his living son's absence. Did David take three years to be consoled over Amnon? Was the consolation faster because David recognized that Amnon had received a just consequence for his crime? It is unclear.

As the next chapter will unfold, we'll see at the least that there may have been reason for David to hold off for so long reaching out to this son he is missing. If there is any public, or even private, knowledge of Absalom's crime there would need to be time to let it settle before reaching out. Otherwise the outcry would be for Absalom to be judged, and possibly if not likely put to death.

Things are coming to pass just as Nathan said. It is a stark lesson that actions have consequences. It is also a study in what happens when we don't manage our own shame and bring it to resolution. The consequences on David's family seem to be a direct result of David holding back and not providing familial guidance and accountability.