

JUNE 15, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON June 8 - 'Watch Your Language' John 14:15-22, Acts 1:1-11, Acts 2:1-4

Today is Pentecost. This is a perfect day to explore something that is wildly incongruent amongst Christians. I believe that dialing in how we speak about things often helps us understand them better. Understanding better works to apply them better in life.

Recently I heard one of the best questions I get asked. "How does this apply to me? How does this affect my life?" This is at the core of so much Christian disconnect. Quoting scripture is great. How we believe is important and critical. But the evidence to the world of whether any of it is genuine is in how it affects our life. What do we do about it?

As a point of trivia, Pentecost isn't a Christian holiday from its beginning. It is actually a Jewish festival, which is why so many Jews were gathered together on that day described in Acts. The coming of the Holy Spirit happened on this festival day, and so we refer to the coming of the Holy Spirit, or as some call it the birthday of the church, Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. This doctrine is very central to the faith of most Christians. The understanding is that each of the three persons must be equal. If one were superior, yet all worshipped as divine then we run into the problem of more than one God.

What is curious, however, is that no matter how strongly people believe in this co-equal, three in one God rarely does the way people speak about God reflect that.

We're going to focus primarily on Jesus and the Holy Spirit today, but let's name them a little more descriptively. Sometimes the three are referred to as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. The Father is the creator most associated with Genesis and the Old Testament, the Redeemer is Jesus who lends his title Christ to Christianity and makes us right with God, and the Sustainer is the one who empowers, fills, guides, and comforts us now, the Holy Spirit.

We may give ourselves a pass on the "Father" aspect because it's frequently synonymous with "God" for many. Unfortunately making this synonymous kind of puts the Father higher than the other two because we interchange the name between a person of God and the fullness of God Godself.

In another thought, using God as synonymous for all three might actually make sense. Each one is an equal part of God and therefore reflects the fullness of God. But most Christians don't give it that much thought because our idea of the significance specifically of Jesus doesn't allow for it.

Let's be honest, Jesus gets the limelight for most Christians. Who created everything? Jesus. Who saves us? Jesus. Who is in us? Jesus. Who do we want to please? Jesus. What name is above every other name? Jesus. In whose name do we pray? Jesus.

Now, some of these have some roots in scripture, but when we lay everything on Jesus there are some things that can get lost and missed in living out our faith practically.

Part of the confusion, at least between Jesus and the Holy Spirit, lies in some differences between the gospels/Acts and Paul's letters.

At the ascension and in the beginning of Acts, Jesus makes some assertions. He is leaving. He is returning to "the Father". The idea is that He is heading out and the disciples will need another influence of the Divine to carry on. So He tells them that He sends them another comforter, advocate, teacher, which is the Holy Spirit. Jesus even tells them to go to Jerusalem and wait for the Spirit to arrive.

When Jesus says "I won't leave you orphans" this is certainly alluding to His leaving. That's what an orphan is. The parent/ guardian is gone and they are all alone. Jesus won't do that to them and He honors that by sending them another.

When the Holy Spirit comes in Acts, the Spirit is the One that fills them, empowers them, gifts them, guides them, and all the rest. It isn't Jesus in them that does it, it's the Spirit. They might do things in Jesus' name certainly. He is their master and they the faithful disciples. But Jesus is gone and they

have taken up the mantle of His message and bringing His redeeming work to the world around them. Paul on the other hand gives us the expressions like “Christ in you.” He is the one who more frequently will talk about the spirit of Christ, even if he also give voice to the works of “the spirit”. Paul’s language is different than what we might expect. But why would we expect any different? Paul’s experience of Jesus wasn’t the same as the disciples. His was a supernatural, mystical experience on the road to Damascus where his conversation was with the Spirit of Jesus.

Also recognize that Paul’s language couldn’t have reflected what we read in the gospels and Acts. His letters were written well before the gospels and the book of Acts. His idea and experience might have been different from what those writers intended.

While honoring that their ideas may have been different, I’d like to take a shot at splitting a few hairs here for the sake of clarity and usefulness. I’ll use some more contemporary turns of phrase.

Paul talks about Jesus “in” us. Jesus, however, has departed the world and sent the Spirit. That said, we have similar language we use to describe one another.

“Singing is just in her”. “If you cut him he bleeds Steelers black and gold.” “His company has been first in his heart ever since he started working there.” And so on.

What we are saying is that whatever is “in” someone isn’t actually in them. Rather the values, principles, loyalty to, etc. is so engrained that it defines a person’s life and choices.

For the singer she can’t help but hum or sing wherever she is and takes every chance to pursue it. For the football fan everyone knows that when the season starts following the team, watching the games, attending the games, maybe playing in a fantasy league will define their choices for the season. For the company man the company will always come first. Faith, hobbies, many times even family and friends are a distant second to making the company succeed.

Having Jesus in our heart or in us is the same thing. It means that our dedication to His teaching, His example, His work and calling is complete. It invades all of who we are. Our decisions are based with Jesus and the guidance of His life as a, if not the, measuring stick.

But when we talk about what is within us. When we honor the person Jesus sent to empower, strengthen, guide, comfort, convict, and call us that is the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit inside of us. We pray through the Spirit, commune with the Spirit, and are bound together by the Spirit. If there is a voice we are hearing and listening for, it is the voice of the Spirit.

As part of God the Spirit reflects the desires of the Father and the Son, but the voice is the Spirit. The Spirit as we see it in Acts is holding us to account, driving us, and also clarifying us as we go into new arenas. The Spirit guided them to the Gentiles and was with them through all of the new and uncertain situations that brought with it. The Spirit is that present voices that sometimes tells us we’re wrong and sometimes pushes us through the difficult times when we are right.

The problem that sometimes happens is that because Jesus is seen as a higher authority, intentionally or not, anything we attribute to Him takes priority and place over anything else. If I assume that what I feel or hear in my heart is automatically from Him, I can use the to override any other influence. Even if what I’m feeling or hearing is wrong.

There are and have been leaders in the faith that have led people far astray with this. They will claim a “word of revelation” from God. The appeal is to the heart with the assumption that naturally if Jesus is there, what the heart is saying is true. If it seems to contradict scripture, that’s alright because after all, God told my heart that there’s a “new rule” or “new understanding”.

This is where having our language and understanding is helpful.

It’s not just using what’s in our heart to discern. We identify our guidance, strength, and the indwelling of God with the Holy Spirit. This gives us peace, comfort, and a force of resolve to stay true to what we know to be correct. It even helps us discern what is correct when we aren’t sure. This is the “what does it mean to me?” of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the voice and strength within and the binding presence of God all around us.

Jesus helps us quality check of what we think we hear the Spirit saying is actually coming from God. We have the benefit of the gospels, which is His story. What is His message? What seems to be His heart? Yes, people even twist the gospels to their own ends and can cherry pick to make the must un-Christlike attitudes supported by their interpretation. Don’t bend to this or give in.

The example of Jesus is the standard to judge ourselves and our choices by. Before He ascended His life of teaching, mercy, healing, sacrifice, standing against religious manipulation, and ultimately finding worth in every creature to be redeemed gave us a model to help us when we wonder if the feeling and message we hear in our heart is the Spirit or ourselves.

Every one of us has the Spirit speaking to us. Do we take the time to evaluate what we hear by the example of Christ, or do we assume that we automatically “have Jesus” and therefore whatever we feel we are receiving must be from God?

Be tuned in to the Holy Spirit. Seek the Spirit as life unfolds before you. Listen to the Spirit and let it guide you even as you open your heart to allow it to comfort and strengthen. At the same time know your scriptures, particularly the gospels. Know the life of the one we claim to follow so that the example we are looking at is accurate and true. Let that example be the lens through which we interpret scripture, and interpret what we feel in our hearts and see in the world around us.

If the persons of the Trinity are truly equal, then recognizing that the Spirit that speaks and the Savior that sets the measuring stick aren’t at odds when we hold them together. They will always agree and inform one another to build our faith.

So what does this mean in practical life? Pray. Maybe in prayer listen more than we talk so we are connected intentionally to the Spirit.

Study. Know the gospels and take time to know them not just in personal reading but in actual study. Take time to ask questions. Interpret in community so that personal agenda colors the scripture to a minimum. Remember there are people smarter, more faithful, and more studied than we are that have answers to questions we may have about stories and language that is thousands of years old. In the end keep in mind and practice that we are called to be people who daily walk in communion with the Spirit, following the example of a Redeemer who walked the world long ago but whose example continues to inspire and speak today.

TOUGH QUESTIONS; HONEST ANSWERS

Question: If the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, what is the love of money?

“Teach and urge these duties. 3 Whoever teaches otherwise and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that is in accordance with godliness 4 is conceited, understanding nothing, and has a morbid craving for controversy and for disputes about words. From these come envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, 5 and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. 6 Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment, 7 for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it, 8 but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. 9 But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

11 But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13 In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you 14 to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. 16 It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

17 As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches but rather on God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, 19 thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

Context is always important. Here the instruction isn’t just about money. It is about money in

relation to faithfulness. It is about priority. And yes, it is a warning to not allow money to become an end/obsession in and of itself.

This passage has built directly into it a warning against the popular “prosperity” gospel that has spread through too much of our tradition. The verse “5 and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain” calls those who try to leverage faith for financial gain as depraved. If faith is an attempt to get rich by expecting God to be a piggy bank, something is drastically wrong and that is not faith.

Loving money has its issues because it upends our sense of right and wrong. Right becomes whatever makes my bank account grow. And too much is never enough. Wrong is anything that might diminish my money. In other words, giving to those in need is wrong because they should figure out their own lives and I don’t have to let go of what I have for their benefit. Hoarding is right because what’s mine is mine. I earned it(or manipulated it) and can do with it as I please.

While it’s always true we can do with what we have as we please, if we are in Christ that looks a particular way.

Love of money isn’t about having money. Love of money is about making material wealth the center of life. Arguably a good litmus test regarding love of money is what one does with it. Comfort is not a crime. Verses 17-`19 put more context to reflecting on our attitudes toward wealth.

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Sometimes people confuse scripture on this front. For example the church in early Acts sounds like any sense of personal wealth was completely disregarded by those Christians. They sold everything they had and “had all things in common”. The made sure everyone’s needs were met.

In today’s political culture the next statement will strike a hurtful chord. This sounds an awful lot like communism. Everyone contributes into the common pot without regard for their own elevation, privilege, or having more than the next person. There was no desire to do better than the next person because what was important was growing in faith, providing for one another, and furthering the gospel. Taken as a stand alone, it sounds like the church is a place like a commune or compound. But there’s more.

In Romans we read about a deaconess that was to be regarded highly and treated well. She is listed as a “benefactor” to Paul and many others. How does this fit in with our discussion?

The understanding is that this was a woman of material means. She had money. As a benefactor she used her means to support the work and ministry of Paul and the early church. She was commended for how she used her wealth, not condemned for having it. How else she lived we don’t know. What we do know is that a meaningful part of her relationship with money was that she used it generously for the glory of God.

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians he talks about God’s provision and gifting to meet our needs. This wasn’t a blanket statement that no one will ever go without if they believe in Jesus. This was an encouragement. The statements are in the context of his asking for the Macedonian churches to collectively take up an offering for the struggling church in Jerusalem. At that time they were doing well for themselves. They had all their needs met and exceeded. So he was requesting their generous giving to support their struggling brothers and sisters elsewhere.

The additional reality is that while it wasn’t transactional there was an understanding. The relationship of Christians is such that when some are in need, those in abundance will help out. Should the tables turn and the Macedonian churches be in need and the Jerusalem church in abundance, things would reverse. The faithful in Jerusalem would be asked to support their brothers and sisters in Macedonia.

Once again, the sense of abundance being provided wasn’t just for personal enjoyment. The abundance is a tool and means of ministry and love to help others in need and support the ministry of the gospel.

A misunderstanding is that when Jesus said He came to “have life and have it more abundantly” he meant abundant material wealth. Nothing is further from the truth. In Jesus’ economy abundant life is wrapped up in faithfulness, peace, joy, love, mercy, and service. Look at the beatitudes in Matthew 5. The blessings are not material. They are spiritual. To quote Jesus on abundance and use it to support greed is grossly antichrist.

A final note here is the widows mite. When a widow came forward with the most meager of offerings, those looking on who had put more in the pot were not very charitable to her in their hearts. Jesus sensed this and gave them a new economic formula. The ones who gave more gave out of their excess. It didn’t hurt them even a little bit. What the widow had was everything she possessed. Who gave more? The widow.

Why?

The offering wasn’t just quantity. It represented something more. It represented faith, trust, and desire to commune with God. Sacrifice, a key part of Jesus’ ministry and example, was a big part of it. In terms of sacrifice, she put the rest to shame. What is the greater gift, \$50 from someone who only has \$100 or \$1,000 from someone who has \$1,000,000? The sacrifice puts the \$50 over the top.

The message is that what we do with what we have is more important than how much we have. How do we use our resources to make the world around us better? How do we use our resources to honor God? What is more important, having a stacked bank account or doing good in the world and resourcing Christ’s ministry?

In the end, no one can tell you whether or not you are suffering from a “love of money”. Actions and values are what do that. Generosity or stinginess does that. And in the end it’s not my judgment on you, me or anyone else that holds sway. It’s God’s. Fortunately we have some good information in scripture to give us some guideposts.

Look at Timothy. See what attitudes and characteristics are illuminated that cast a light of faithfulness or greed. Look at your attitudes towards those in need and the needs of the ministries around you. Look at how much you value the grand total of your assets, and how that stacks up to how those assets are used to further God’s kingdom. That will tell the tale.

In the end there is no more pride to be had in poverty than in wealth. Neither is the sole story of faithfulness. The fullness of life, faith, belief, and action in the context of what we see in scripture paints a fuller picture.