

JUNE 22, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON June 15 - 'Today's Yeast' 1 Corinthians 5:1-8, Matthew 13:33

Our scriptures this morning are somewhat common. Many of us have heard the expression that a "little leaven leavens the whole lump". This is a simple image that anyone who has baked bread grasps. The yeast relative to the rest of the ingredients is somewhat minor. The result however is major. In fact if it doesn't do its job the whole batch isn't going to work as it's supposed to.

Small quantity...big effect.

The leaven is typically illustrating the result of sin and our attitude towards it. The example is both for the individual as well as a larger group or congregation.

With the individual it might be what we often hear referred to as a "slippery slope". I give into a temptation because I think it's "no big deal". To do it once makes it easier to do again. Then something more significant in the same vein comes along and it's easier to give into that temptation as well. And so on and so forth.

Perhaps getting comfortable with going against what I know to be correct in one lane gets me comfortable enough that I start venturing into other lanes as well.

Scripture also talks about consciences being "seared with a hot iron". The more we get comfortable with wrong, the more we immune ourselves against following the voice of the Spirit inside of us calling us to do right in God's eyes.

That little leaven works its way through the whole lump.

The same can be true in a larger group. One person brings a bad habit into the group and another things "well, it's not that bad for so and so, maybe I can get away with it."

This is particularly true for leadership. If bad theology, bad values, and/or bad behavior is not only embraced but even endorsed suddenly you can have the followers doing the same thing, believing the same thing, and ultimately an entire group can be led down a wrong path.

Corinthians is an example of this. They are on the receiving end of a very angry Paul here. The behavior is that some man in the congregation is fooling around with his dad's wife. That Paul doesn't label the person the man's mother I believe suggests this might be a wife other than the man's mother. Still, this is an outrageous act that is happening consistently.

Not only is it known, but it seems the congregation is proud of what is happening, even supportive. Paul can't believe it.

What follows is an extreme version of "a little yeast" correction. He goes so far as to essentially say "look, if you are so off base that you can't tell right from wrong to this extent, you aren't fit to be around anyone who calls themselves a believer and engages in x,y, and z sin!"

Some churches take this to an extreme, though they do cherry pick. They pick a sin or two from this list in Corinthians and run judgmental and condemning. Paul lists "sexual sin" among them which is usually the target. But Paul also lists idolators and slanderers.

If we call putting anything before God idolatry, there are a lot of those in Christianity today. Hobbies, work, and politics are three quick things that come to mind.

If we see slander as spreading negativity about someone else, particularly if it's just a rumor, and especially behind the person's back...well, Christianity has a lot of slanderers as well.

Yet the idolator and the slanderer often gets a pass.

What I'm getting at here is that we need to be vigilant yet also make sure how we handle the sin we find has to be considered honestly, fairly, and with grace.

The harsher judgment, by in large, when we uncover sin has to be towards the one we see in the mirror. We see our own sin, and we confront it with the end goal of carving it out of our lives.

Certainly we need to be aware of sin in the midst of a congregation. It's the only way we can help one another grow. But we can't use Corinthians as some random bludgeon towards people or actions we find personally offensive or problematic. If we booted every person that has ongoing sin in their lives out of the church there would be no church. Grace in community can turn lives around.

That said, if something as extreme as what Paul is specifically calling out is going on and the congregation is being dragged away, well then something more stringent makes sense.

All that said, the idea of something starting small and growing larger isn't reserved for sin. It can also be good

things. I'm specifically talking about faith. Jesus talks about faith "as a grain of mustard seed grows to become one of the largest of bushes".

Life the leaven of sin, the leaven of faith can also work its way through an individual or a group. We see those around us who live lives devoted to God and faithful to pursuing what is right, to love of neighbor, and to living into the example of Jesus. The hope is to be inspired by them to do better ourselves. As faith grows in one, it spreads to others.

This is why it's important to share where God is at work in our lives. Where we have seen the goodness of God coming from obedience. Where God has used us to bring about grace and life in the life of another. How are others supposed to be inspired if no one shares the fruits of their faith?

How can the leaven spread, or the seed grow beyond the individual if the group never gets to know the stories? This sense of leaven and a small seed is so important. And there is yet another place this is incredibly important to remember today.

This is a little different, but I believe it tracks.

When we carry the label Christian we are no longer just representing ourselves. We represent the entirety of the faith. We represent Jesus. How do we represent Him?

The connection here is that when we represent Jesus to a world increasingly distrusting of people who call themselves Christians, and I am more distrusted than any of you as a pastor, we need to recognize that what we say and do will leave an impression on someone not just of ourselves, but of Christianity.

This means that smug response, condescending remark, joke we think now one else will hear but we feel the need to check who is around just in case someone we are about to skewer is nearby, idea or group we are about to demean or ridicule can and often does leave a lasting mark on those that receive it.

The temptation is to blame the individual. "Oh, that's their problem". "They are just being thin skinned". That doesn't wash. If someone is vulnerable, or has been terribly harmed and is therefore sensitive to ignorant and insensitive comments, if I'm the one who is making those kinds of comments or actions without concern for how they might do damage, the issue is my own.

Moreover, if I do those kinds of things the leaven spreads from me to you. You might be living perfectly before God, but my association with you, and my acts representing Christians mean every time I act I am painting you with the same color I paint myself. It works through the whole lump if not in practice in the eyes of the people who may need the love of Christ revealed through God's people the most.

Fortunately, it works for the good as well. Just like sin can be a deadly leaven, faith and goodness can be a life giving one.

That same person set to run away and have negative stereotypes reinforced by my bad or ignorant acting and speaking can be given a reason to reconsider what it means to be a Christian by my acts of love and grace.

The good things you do, that I do, reflect just the same on the larger group. It is the good leaven. When someone is expecting the Christian before them to respond with judgment, harshness, or cruelty and they are met with grace, patience, and kindness that registers. Suddenly not "all Christians" fit a negative mold.

Doors for conversation and relationship are opened that pushes in a good and hopeful direction.

"What Christians do you belong with?" "I belong with the ones at Marion First United Methodist." "Oh, ok."

Maybe you've given the reason that is the tipping point for someone to return to their faith and let us accompany them on that journey.

Each of us has a tremendous power that we take for granted or perhaps don't even recognize. Just as we say that in Christ "our life is not our own", in many ways neither is our witness. My witness becomes yours as we are associated together. Yours becomes mine.

As we live in a world that many times can feel upside down, we remember to be mindful of how our lives reflect Jesus. When they reflect His goodness, grace, love, and sacrifice it makes a difference for the world around us, for those we love and call brothers and sisters, and ultimately for our own hearts and faith as well.