

JUNE 29, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON 'Shining a Light: Willpower' Gen 3:1-6, 1 Sam 13:7-12, 2 Sam 12:13, Matt 26:40-44

This week we begin a series to take us through the coming weeks. I am going to give you a peak into my world of interest. Most of you are aware of my affection for superheroes and comic books. What you may not know is that these stories in many ways are reflections of themes that are significant to humanity as a whole. These themes go all the way back to our Bible.

I would suggest that particularly in western cultures that have such a rich background in the Christian tradition, it makes sense that many of the ideals that weave through the myths and folklore have some form of similarity to the stories of faith that we hold so dearly.

Having this in the front of our minds can change our experience of even the most secular of stories. We are able to actively connect the plots and themes to our faith making for limitless moments to grow and deepen our understanding of both who God is and who God is not.

To give a crash course of thinking along these lines:

Our stories of heroes and villains are connected very clearly to our understanding of right and wrong, good and evil. This is a theme throughout all of scripture. Whether it is Adam and Eve with the serpent, Jesus and the demons, or the people of God against their enemies we see over and over the stories in scripture of heroes, and good vs. evil.

As comics moved forward some say that the stories got "darker". In truth people wanted stories that were more tuned in to the realities of life. Good doesn't always win. Something bad things happen to the best people. There is complexity because sometimes the bad is redeemed and the good loses its way.

Scripture is the same. Stories like Job remind us that bad happens to good. Paul is redeemed from his persecuting ways to become a mighty apostle. Saul is the hope of Israel as her first king and a serious let down. David is a great king who falls before temptation in adultery and murder. Jeremiah is thrown into a pit. Joseph is sold into slavery yet saves a nation and his family.

When the bad guys get too bad there was the rise of the anti-hero in comics. The one who fights against the villains but with greater, even lethal violence. They are at odds with the sensibilities of the noble hero because of their methods. Scripture has its own anti-heroes. The most famous of these is Samson.

There was even a min-series in the mid-90s when the more violent anti heroes had become incredibly popular. Two creators were fed up with what seemed to be a darker, cynical view of the world and that the heroes of old that inspired hope against hope that noble good would prevail were fading. It was called Kingdom Come. The old heroes had retired and a new wave of heroes that were just as bad as the villains they fought sprung up. The world was in danger of destruction. The entire series was set with the central character being a pastor guided by an angel of judgment. The language was entirely taken from Revelation but put in the context of these stories. The point was very similar. In the face of a world bent on destroying itself someone needed to intervene to overcome a world gone wild with hopelessness and bad intentions.

There is a specific set of stories and characters I have in mind that reflect some of the most basic aspects of who we are as humans, and provide a wonderful springboard to look at ourselves in light of scripture.

Some of you may know the character Green Lantern. What you might not know is that as those stories evolved they went beyond green to color the entire spectrum of light. Each color represents a different aspect of feeling that is used to power a weapon that can create any object of any size to be used defensively or offensively.

The colors, using the old ROY G BIV model are Red: Rage, Orange: Greed, Yellow: Fear, Green: Will, Blue: Hope, Indigo: Redemption, and Violet: Love.

I don't know if it's intentional or not, but selecting green puts it right in the center of the spectrum. I wonder if making that willpower is an accident. If we think about it willpower is indeed central to much of our lives and has the power to make all of the rest into action that is right or wrong. We experience anger, fear, desire for more, hope, and love. It is our choices, our will, that define what we do with any of those moments. We are in need of redemption, it is our choice, our will that determines whether we seek it. Others need to know they are redeemable, they need our forgiveness, it is our choice as to whether or not we offer it.

Our scripture today carries important perspectives on our will.

In Genesis we see that the initial problem of creation isn't necessarily what we are often told it is. It isn't the disobedience. Sure, that's a problem but it's not the first problem. It isn't the temptation. That, too, is a

problem, but it isn't the foundational problem. The problem is that from the start the option to choose was available. From the start free will made giving into temptation a possibility.

If there were no will. No choice, then temptation wouldn't matter. Nothing could override preprogrammed settings to do what was instructed and expected. From the beginning we have the possibility of resisting or indulging temptation.

This story of the fall of Adam and Eve is a powerful reminder that God has expectations and that as powerful as God is, we have the power to obey or disobey. To accept or reject.

Fortunately we serve a God that when we choose poorly is willing to extend grace and forgiveness. It doesn't mean there is no consequence. It does mean that our relationship with God isn't severed by God in our mistakes. God is the one who pursues us and loves us like the father loved the prodigal son. The choice is ours as to where the relationship with God goes. Will we accept grace? Will we turn from the mistake to grow into living rightly?

All of this is our free will. We have the incredible power of choice.

In our stories of Saul and David we seen willpower exerted in different ways. Saul's situation is almost pitiable. They are preparing to go into battle. Ritual demanded a sacrifice to God to secure God's favor before the fight. Samuel told Saul to wait for him to come and perform the sacrifice. It wasn't for the king to do, it was for the prophet. Samuel was delayed for some reason.

The men get antsy. Samuel isn't coming. What to do? It seems a failure of nerve is setting in and the army is beginning to leave. Saul knows they need to win this fight and since Samuel isn't arriving decides that someone needs to perform this sacrifice. So he does it.

Of course, as often happens, just when we make the mistake accountability shows up. Samuel calls out Saul's disobedience.

This is where for me the pity comes in. Saul was in a hard place. Who knows what any of us would have done in his spot? He was in a bad situation and made a bad call but one that I think we can at least relate to.

He had the choice to exert his willpower over his anxiety and wait for Samuel or to give in and do what he knew he shouldn't.

For David his situation was far more cut and dry. He saw someone else's wife and desired her. Rather than exert his free will, his power of choice, to resist temptation instead he indulged it. He chose to indulge his king-like power rather than use his will to hold fast to his relationship with God. When she got pregnant, in order to cover up the situation David had her husband killed. Again, rather than exert his will to overcome his shame and face his actions instead he indulged his fear and committed murder.

What is interesting about these two is that the actions are on very different scales in terms of "wrongness" or "wickedness". David is clearly the winner in terms of this scope. Yet David goes on to become the great king after God's heart and Saul's reign ends in dishonor. Why?

Again, free will. What did each choose, each will, to do with the outcome of their mistake?

With Saul he chooses to indulge his pride rather than humility. Ego guides his will and he makes excuse after excuse. This pattern of taking no responsibility will follow him through his reign and he will alienate himself from God.

David's response is what we read today. One line. He confesses and owns his mistake. David chooses to indulge his humility and repair the relationship with God rather than hide and continue walking away. Though David will have more than one issues with obedience, his response is always to choose to return to his God. His will is guided by a desire to reconcile with God and so he is remembered as a man after God's own heart.

So we see so far that the will is a power that we all have that guides the course of our lives. It is THE force that guides us as we are presented with choice after choice every day. In Saul and David we see examples of how this bears out over a long course of life and drives us into our away from the arms of God.

Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane gives us one more piece that is critical and we'll flesh out a little more next week.

The backdrop is that it's the end of the day. I'm sure everyone is tired but it's the night before the crucifixion. Jesus knows this. Even though He's dropped numerous hints that night, particularly over dinner, it seems the disciples didn't pick up on it. When Jesus goes off to pray He asks the disciples to stay awake with Him. He goes off, prays, comes back and they are fast asleep. He scolds them and asks again. He goes off, prays, comes back and there they are asleep again.

In fairness, Jesus is amped up because He knows what's coming. Most of us can relate to knowing something major, good or bad, is happening the next day and then being unable to sleep the night before. The disciples on the other hand are tired from the day. They can't seem to help but doze.

Then Jesus utters a famous expression. "The spirit is WILLING but the flesh is weak."

Is He correcting them? Perhaps yes. In the process however Jesus is verbalizing a very real condition that all of us struggle with. Every one of us gets tired. We grow weary. That weariness can be physical, emotional, mental, spiritual or some combination of all of these. In those moments when we are worn down so often our ability to stand strong in the face of temptation weakens as well. It is so much easier to give in than to muster the strength to fight against what we know is wrong and do what is right.

We may have a spirit that is profoundly willing and wanting to do right. At the same time our resolve can crumble in the midst of overwhelming circumstances.

Paul acknowledges this in Romans when he laments that he knows the things he should do but seems unable to do them. He knows what sin is but can't seem to stop sinning completely.

This is when we recognize that we need help. Sometimes our own willpower isn't enough on its own.

We recognize that God works powerfully through both spirit and through those around us. It would have been wise if the disciples had recognized the gravity of what was happening and had a conversation about holding each other accountable. "Hey! If anyone sees anyone else starting to doze wake them up! Someone put on some coffee, turn on some music, make sure we have lots of water. It's hard to fall asleep if you're worried you have to pee."

We need people we can confide in when we are weak to give us the support we need to stay on the right path. It helps immeasurably to have that presence and physical voice in our ear guiding us to do the right thing.

There are moments when I am weary and there's something I absolutely need to do, a place I need to be but I just don't feel like doing it. I am tired, beat, and don't feel like I have the strength to show up the way I need to show up. And then I have the person and people in my life that remind me that I can do it. I can honor the responsibility and then crash to rest after. Those voices make all the difference.

In spirit we also are reminded of Paul's words that "God's strength is made perfect in our weakness". This is the power of prayer.

When our will is failing we aren't alone. We take a moment and turn to God, admitting that we don't have it in us. Then we ask God to make up the difference for that moment. "God give me strength". This is part of the point of fasting. We give up something significant and when we have the temptation to indulge we are reminded of our commitment to God. We then take a moment to turn to God asking for the strength to make it through that moment of weakness.

We are not on this journey by ourselves. We are partnered with God each and every step. We are partnered with each other. Our own strength isn't all we have. Thank goodness because sometimes that's not enough. When we are willing to go to God and one another with our weakness not only do we open ourselves to a great reservoir of strength from which to draw, but we open an easier door for confession. It's much easier to admit a mistake when the people we need to admit to are aware of just how deeply we are struggling.

Forgiveness is given more freely. Repentance isn't a lonely endeavor. All of it is in the community of God and God's people.

Our will can be strong as iron yet sometimes as fragile as glass. It is a great gift and great power given to all of us from the beginning of time. I want to encourage us to let God be the guide in how we use this gift. When we fail, know that we can choose to be reconciled to God and one another. When we are weak know that we have strength far beyond ourselves.

Then, even when life turns a way it shouldn't, even if we step off of God's path for a moment, we like David are assured that we can return to that path and live a life that ultimately pleases God.

TOUGH QUESTIONS; HONEST ANSWERS

The Question: If the Bible was put together by humans, how do we know it's the Word of God?

That's a great question! The first question to ask is what makes the Bible a spiritual authority for you? This is important because we'll see as we work through some of the details that this is an incredibly significant matter. There are likely some things you haven't thought of or realized about this book we hold as sacred.

Keep in mind as we work through the question that none of what we discuss intends to remove any of the sacredness of the Bible. Rather it intends to be honest about it so that we come to our understanding based on what is.

In our discussion on Thursday night, this first question was a little tough. One of the honest recognitions was that we see it as holy because we were told it is holy. Someone told us to treat this book as sacred and so we do. The word "Bible" is synonymous with God's inspired word. In truth that word "Bible" just means a collection of books, which it is.

We also have to recognize that the Bible never refers to itself as the Word of God. We do. There are parts that are referred to as the Word of God, but those are largely times when a prophet or such receives an audible,

conversant message from God Godself and is passing it along. Those parts are considered the Word of God because the one speaking is claiming to literally be repeating actual conversation or instruction from God Godself.

It would be as if I gave instruction to someone verbally and they passed it on as “the words of Brent”. That would be accurate.

The other reference to the Word of God is Jesus Himself as labelled in John’s Gospel. In that regard we could see Jesus’ words and deeds as direct communication from God as we claim Jesus to be divine. So the parts of the gospels communicating Jesus words and deeds might be seen that way.

Other than that, the Bible doesn’t claim Word of God status for itself. We impart that to it. Why?

In large part because of how people interpret the passage in 2Timothy that calls all scripture “inspired” by God or “God breathed”. The God breathed is more accurate.

A couple notes on this.

It doesn’t say “God dictated”. It doesn’t say “God wrote it”. It doesn’t argue that God possessed the writers, puppeting their hands. This wouldn’t make sense anyway. There are parts of scripture that don’t agree, even in things like the death and birth of Jesus. For many who say God wrote the whole thing they also say that the disparities in the stories are evidence of there truthfulness. Different people recording the same event from different vantage points. They see details differently.

The problem with this is that if it were one author, God, there would be no discrepancy. The argument that different people wrote the details makes all the sense in the world. It also means that the argument that they were scribal puppets goes out the window. If God is, as we say, a “God of order, not chaos”, then God would not purposefully confuse the matter with differing details that we have to sort through.

The expression “God breathed” more accurately can refer all the way back to the creation story. What is the breath of God? It is the breath of life. “God breathed into Adam”. In other words, all scripture is life giving. Again, this tracks. It gives life in fullness. It gives everlasting life in salvation. It gives wisdom and direction to live life faithfully.

Another issue we have is that when the passage refers to “scripture” it isn’t referring to anything in the New Testament. In truth it can’t be referring to the Bible as we know it at all.

Again, why?

The Bible didn’t find the structure we see collected on our shelves until the mid 300s. At the time Timothy was being written there was no agreement as to what constituted “the Bible”. The writers of the New Testament weren’t writing anything they claimed as scripture, particularly the letters. And in truth the letters of Paul pre-date the gospels.

Does this mean we shouldn’t see the New Testament as scripture? Of course not. This has been our tradition and belief for century on century. What we can’t say with any truth is that the writer of 1 Timothy was talking about the Bible as we know it. That writer was speaking of whatever various writings they considered scripture in their time. It is highly likely that these were Jewish writings, and many of them not necessarily included in the Bible that we know.

This is actually incredibly freeing. Misinterpreting 2 Timothy has given rise to many forcing a literal reading of the Bible (which not even those who claim to do so actually accomplish). Trying to read it this way has led to many horrible values and actions through the centuries, and taken theologies far away from Christ. Force feeding literalism makes for absurd arguments to try and harmonize things in scripture that don’t work.

One the other hand, seeing scripture as “life giving” frees us up to read as the writers intended. To engage their metaphors, parables, poetry, allegory, turns of phrase, and more to let the words speak meaning to us authentically.

The books themselves came together in a rather normal way.

First, though the stories go back a few thousand years before Jesus, the writing of them likely wasn’t until at their earlier around 900 or 800 BC, which tracks around the time just prior to the Assyrian exile. How do we know this? The language the manuscripts are written in didn’t exist prior to this date. You can’t write in a language that doesn’t exist.

The Israelites wrote their scriptures and they were collected through the centuries, ultimately finding their way into their Holy Book. The first five books became known as Torah and the full of what we call the Old Testament is known as the Tanakh. Interestingly the Jewish tradition doesn’t place the same weight on the same books that we as Christians do.

After Jesus’ death the letters were written to fledgling churches beginning around 45/50 CE, the gospels came after that beginning in 70 and running likely through the early 100s which also included some of the letters as well.

As Christianity began to form into a full on faith, the communities that comprised it began to recognize together that certain writings bore weight. They were seen as authoritative. There were more letters than the ones we read and more gospels than the ones included in our Bible. Over time the community largely agreed which ones passed muster to be considered scriptural.

Ultimately, there were councils that met once Christianity had become a state sponsored religion to decide once and for all what books should be considered the canon for the faith. These included the Council of Rome in 382, the Synod of Hippo in 392, and the Council of Carthage in 397-419 as well as some others much later when the Reformation occurred.

Arguably the final set of books was the one a heavy hitter bishop named Athanasius fought for.

In the end, the Bible as we know it came about through a process of communal discernment of believers agreeing on what should hold sway as our sacred text. That discernment became cemented, unsurprisingly, when the church has a safe and set structure, was backed by the state at the time, and had leadership trusted with guiding the faith and the faithful.

We might argue that because this was such a lengthy and communal process that the Holy Spirit had time and sway to speak through faithful believers in order to arrive at the best collection of writings to guide us.

This, of course, is also the product of a faith that we already possess. I believe in the Holy Spirit, and therefore I can see how God could work through this process. It's a bit of a catch 22. I have the faith in the Spirit which causes me to see scripture as sacred. But the faith I have in the Spirit came because I was raised to read the scripture as sacred which led me to my understanding of the Holy Spirit.

In the end in our discussion we came to a simple, if unsatisfying conclusion. It becomes sacred, God's Word, or whatever we might call it by engaging with it. We engage the scriptures in study, application, and prayer. As we do our lives speak to their holiness and truth. We feel the presence of the Spirit as we step out and take scripture to task with living it. We are open to how God might work through this process and see how it impacts our lives. As our lives take the shape of grace, compassion, and love in service to God the truth of the message becomes more evident. The more this grows, the greater our belief that indeed God does speak boldly and kindly through the words of the Bible.

The compelling statement that the Bible is "the Word of God" isn't just in making the claim. It isn't in the circular and shallow argument(which doesn't bear out anyway) that it's that because it says it is. The compelling aspect is the profound and transforming effect it has in the lives of those who take it seriously and live into it faithfully.

Certainly many could argue the atrocities and horrors people have committed using the Bible as their authority. This is why interpretation is so critical. It is why mixing interpretation with dogma and political persuasion is dangerous. Interpretation determines whether we treat and read this sacred text rightly and let God speak genuinely through it to us.

Is it sacred and holy? I would say so. But that's because of a life that has been encouraged and willing to engage it more and more on its terms rather than my own.