

JULY 27  
2025

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### *SERMON 'Shining a Light: Greed & Giving'*

This week we are mixing the oddity of Christmas in July with the series we are in. The series is making the not to difficult jump from the mythology of the green lanterns to spiritual truths we know from scripture. Each color of the light spectrum represents an energy that is fueled by a character trait or emotion by the person that is wielding that energy.

So far we've looked at green, the power of will. For us we considered it in regards to choice and conviction. Blue, the power of hope, which is a central part of our faith. Yellow, the power of fear which we noted can be useful, and overcome by the power of love. And today we do orange. Why this is the color chosen for its trait I do not know. But orange is the power of greed.

In the mythology this energy has a unique attribute. All of the others are wielded by a corps of soldiers called lanterns. There are many. For orange, there is only one. Why?

It is greed. The one bearing the ring that wields the power refuses to share it with anyone else.

This character's name is Larfleeze and he is so greedy that even when a villain trying to feed off of his emotions attempted to ease his greed by giving him everything he wanted it didn't matter. Larfleeze was offered the family he lost, and yet every time he was given another chance he destroyed it because not even with his own child could he be giving and selfless.

It's also a reality that this character is lonely and ultimately miserable. Greed has a way of doing that to a person.

In keeping with our other theme for the day, Christmas, greed isn't too far a jump. One of the great criticisms about Christmas is that it has been commercialized. It's about the trappings not the truth. Greed is a common theme raised.

That idea gets fed by the constant refrain we hear around the holiday. "What do you want for Christmas?" In other words, "let's think about what I'm going to get!" The sales that begin at Thanksgiving have gone from one day, Black Friday, to an entire many days long retail blowout. The estimate is that 64% of shopping is not just buying for others but people buying for themselves.

Now, I'm not one to get in the way of a good deal. Trust me. The critique of commercialism, however, isn't without legitimacy. There are non-Christians who celebrate Christmas with none of the Jesus. And even many Christians celebrate far more the parties, gatherings, and gifts more than really dialing in on the birth of Jesus. Even the term Merry Christmas through recent years has fallen victim to human attitude. People make aggressive comments that they are going to use that term rather than "happy holidays" just as an affront to anyone who objects to the phrase Merry Christmas. As I've said before, I have yet to encounter that objection unless the person saying Merry Christmas is being obnoxious and confrontational.

Commercialism creeping in to a holiday like Christmas sadly isn't all that surprising. In our world people want to make money, people want stuff, people want a deal and so if a holiday gives a reason to stoke the fires of greed and keeping up with the neighbors there will never be a shortage of those willing and wanting to exploit it. If it's at an exaggerated point over the holiday that is just a symptom that it's hovering all about the rest of the year as well.

Scripture has something to say about the out of whack priorities between wealth, possessions, and faith. The gospel of Matthew has multiple relevant verses.

Chapter 6 reminds us that we can't serve two masters because ultimately we'll love one and hate the other. We can't serve God and money. While there are plenty of other potential "masters" we could serve, Jesus chooses money. Why? I suggest that it's because across the board money is a temptation. It can buy a lot of comfort and ease that is preferable to the struggle of a life of sacrificial faith.

Chapter 10 we have the rich young ruler. A wealthy man asks what he needs to do to enter the Kingdom of God. He tells Jesus how he's kept all of these commandments his whole life. Jesus responds by telling him to sell all his stuff and give the money to the poor. The man walks away dejected because he loved his wealth and possessions more than honoring God. Then the famous saying that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Money and things can have a strong sway over our allegiance. The story also brings out another sense. He was asked to help those in need. Loving God means loving our neighbor, especially those in need. To not love our

neighbor is the same as not loving God. Was the rich man's lack of love for God, or was it a lack of love for neighbor that led him to reject sharing what he had? We don't know. In the end it doesn't matter. One generally equates to the other.

A final one from Matthew is that storing treasure in this world is ultimately not as important as storing treasure in heaven. In other words God's economy is more important than the world's.

Finally, and we covered this in one of our "tough questions honest answers" sessions, is the idea that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil from 2 Timothy. Here is the full context of that statement:

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.[b] 6 Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment, 7 for we brought nothing into the world, so that[c] 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[d] 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.

This context is important. It isn't condemning having wealth. Not at all. It is warning against life being lived with the priority of pursuing it. That leads to poor decisions because the end question isn't whether or not something is right before God. It is whether or not it increases my wealth.

What it does point out is that those who are of means are to use those resources for the sake of Christ. To use it for the ministry and spread of the gospel. To use it generously to uplift those in need. The letter even echoes Jesus in Matthew. "do good, rich in good works, generous, ready to share, 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."

Money isn't the problem. It is the selfish pursuit and use of it. In fact at the beginning of the passage it gives a perspective on faith as a whole. It is condemning false teachers with one of their tells signs and faults being the use of faith as a means of gain. In other words, using faith for selfish advancement.

And this sense is a greater root of greed. It is rooted in selfishness and self-absorption. Which is why the greater the greed, the greater the selfishness, the lonelier the existence and likely the more miserable. Why? Not only does it take us away from any sense of Godly focus and priority. It also isolates us because we care less and less about anyone around us. It's all about myself. So even in a crowd there's only one person that I care about. Me.

Ultimately, selfishness violates the essence of the gift of Christmas.

The gift of Christmas is Jesus Christ. Given not for the sake of God but for the sake of all of us. Not because God needs anything from us. Jesus came because the love of God is so great that God gives to us despite the reality that there's nothing God needs from us in return. It's all sacrifice for our benefit.

1 Timothy gives us something different to be greedy for. It takes the idea of pursuing things all for self and flips it on its head. We have things that we are actually supposed to be greedy for. Perhaps put differently we have things we are supposed to passionately pursue.

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.

do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share

Want more of what makes this world truly better in the hope that we are living into the eternity of God's Kingdom here and now even as we wait for it later. Get and Gain in order to be able to give more freely. Adopt the

Spirit of God entering Christ into the world. Live in such a way that it's about the good of all creation, whether what we do brings some worldly return or not. That's not the point anyway. Does it bring a spiritual and Godly reward to us and others? There's the question.

The beauty of this is that this greed doesn't isolate us. It connects us. We build relationships that are truly founded in love for one another. Bonds are forged that are unbreakable because they don't depend on an exchange of worldly goods. They are forged in the connecting of spirits seeking the good of one another.

Rather than loneliness it builds community that is far and wide.

It makes me wonder why we can get so territorial about when we get to celebrate God breaking into the world in the form of Jesus. Why people put boundaries on a date.

Remembering the selfless act of God's gift to us should be an every day occurrence. We are supposed to imitate God and what deeper and more significant part of God changes our lives and the world than this?

Keep giving. Get greedy for the true and genuine Spirit of God revealed in Christ. The treasure of your hearts will be full even while building up treasure in heaven where nothing can take it away.

## TOUGH QUESTIONS; HONEST ANSWERS - "What Does Hell Look Like?"

The idea of hell is one that is used to scare countless people into some semblance of "faith". It is the domain of eternal punishment. Many think that the devil rules there and administers the torment. There is the image of flames, and screaming, and burning throughout all of eternity if one doesn't give oneself over to Jesus in this life.

This is the evangelist's simplistic tactic to frighten conversions. Yet "conversion" out of fright isn't really faith. At least not at the outset. And the promises of a prayer that is fire insurance on eternity, allowing someone to return to life unchanged is a false promise. So what is hell?

There's a lot to this question and the trappings of it.

First, the Bible isn't in agreement on what hell looks like, where it is, or what it constitutes. This might be uncomfortable to hear, but it's true.

In the Old Testament there's no real concept of the afterlife, at least not in terms of reward and punishment. Their belief and understanding was something called Sheol, or later equating to Hades the land of the dead. It was a place underground, another layer in creation, where the dead congregated. All, no matter whom, went to the same place.

The evolution of this idea is evidenced in the New Testament. 1 Peter talks about Jesus descending to the land of the dead, to those "imprisoned from the time of Noah" and proclaiming to them. The sense is that all were located there and Jesus gave them the opportunity to get sprung to paradise if they would receive His proclamation.

The word "evolution" might be striking to some. It conjures ideas of science vs. religion. It simply means something moves on and changes to a better incarnation. I argue that in faith perhaps it means it changes to a better understanding. In the period between Old and New Testaments cultural and religious influences collided. The question of a just good in the face of worldly evil that seems to not mete out justice was a very real question. For the Jews particularly who had a sense that God rewarded good and punished evil.

If justice wasn't meted out here then when? In the next life. Faith and understanding changed and grew. For some if not all. In the New Testament we see Paul pitting Pharisees and Sadducees against each other because they disagreed over the idea of the resurrection of the body from the dead. Even then some didn't hold to any sense of afterlife.

So the understanding evolves that there is a place of punishment and a place of reward in the afterlife. We call the punishment hell. However in the New Testament, where this idea comes to rest even the images seem to be metaphorical. The most common reference is to Gehenna.

Gehenna for some references a place of horrific child sacrifice that happened in times long ago. A place of immeasurable torment. Others still refer to a valley referred to as such where the carcasses of temple sacrifices would be hauled. This particular reference makes sense when we talk about the flame that isn't quenched (constantly burning the refuse) and the worm that never dies (maggots on rotting flesh). Wherever hell (Gehenna) is, it's this nasty and bad.

The unending fire and undying worm, along with a term like "everlasting" destruction" in 1 Thessalonians lead to a belief that the punishment is eternal. In Revelation, however, the fire imagery is repeated in the "lake of fire" but there is a sense of a "second death". In other words an annihilation. In this sense the two differ. One is eternal, the other is a final erasure from existence.

In terms of location, some posit that because heaven is so far removed from hell in spirit, they are completely removed in location. In the parable in Luke of Lazarus and the rich man, where punishment and reward seem to be highlighted, they are much closer. The rich man is in torment while the beggar, Lazarus, is not. The rich

man begs Lazarus to dip his finger in water to let a simple drop fall on his tongue. They are that close. In other words souls can see and hear one another from heaven and hell.

This becomes tricky in our human conceptualizing of things. On one hand in Corinthians Paul talks about shedding the mortal body to put on an immortal one, and often noted is that we receive a “new name” in the after-life. That would suggest that we wouldn’t/couldn’t recognize one another. Yet here the illustration is that the rich man and Lazarus clearly know one another. The other wrinkle is our sense that heaven wouldn’t be heaven if certain people aren’t there. How much moreso if we could see them in eternal torment across the way?

The point here is that there isn’t one singular image of what hell looks like, nor how long it lasts. Which leads us to one final consideration. Justice and fairness.

We’re going to couch what comes next in the image of a loving parent and a child. Parental imagery is very much equated with God in relation to us as people. Fortunately we have this same relationship in our humanity to compare.

In our humanness we have figured something out. We have learned that by in large sentencing someone to a life of imprisonment and punishment for one bad decision isn’t just, nor is it fair. Those of us that have children would certainly not do this. When a child makes a mistake they might get grounded for a week, or two, or four. But it isn’t for the rest of their life. There is a shelf life on it. As there should be.

Scripture itself makes the statement “if you being sinful know how to give good things, how much more your perfect Father in heaven?” This makes it clear that we have a perspective on love and consequence that isn’t all out of kilter.

So the question becomes, legitimately so, “if God is just why is punishment for a wrong choice over maybe 70-80 years lasting an eternity?” Heck, even we as mere humans know enough to know that isn’t fair! If God is loving, even our imperfect love for our children gives more grace than this. If we say God is the pinnacle of mercy, grace, and love how can God’s be punishment be so much more harsh and cruel?

Let’s take it a step further. We hear excuses like “God’s ways aren’t our ways” and “God can consequence as God pleases”. We hear “well, the choice is up to each individual, not God.” In Yet we’re supposed to be imitators of God. If this is the case, why any leniency at all in punishment? One bad choice, one lifetime sentence thank you very much. If it’s good enough for God on a cosmic scale shouldn’t it be good enough for us here in the world if we’re supposed to follow God’s example?

Further, what about those for whom the choice is limited or nonexistent? Born in the wrong place and never hear the message? Done. Not possessing the mental faculties to grasp the gospel? Done. Raised and indoctrinated so deeply into another tradition that it’s insanity to consider anything else(we do this to our kids with Christianity)? Done.

Once we go hard and fast to a very “orthodox”, evangelical sense of salvation we are backed into this very corner because it’s tunnelled into very specific belief, creed, statement of faith, and prayer to get there. Push that envelope and what we usually get is stuttered back pedaling or some kind of spiritual gymnastics that gives God the ability to level what we would declare unfair and even unjust punishment and torment.

As we often see with tough questions, the honest answer tends to push us to more tough questions. That’s okay. It should. What that means is that we are trying to understand the lovingness of God as it reveals itself in the complicated circumstances of real life. If anything that should make us more humble, less judgmental, and way more gracious and compassionate.

The truth is that there is no unified definition, location, or description of the place we call hell. Here is my best offering to the matter:

Whatever it looks like, there does seem to be a sense that there is justice, reward, and consequence brought to bear after we pass away from this world. As with any negative consequence, we’re way better off avoiding it than having it come down on our head.

As people, we seem to have an awful time making the right choices each and every time a choice presents itself. We have an awful time keeping our attitudes in check to mirror God’s. So we need something to even things up. To help us help ourselves and make up the difference where we can’t between right action and bad choices. We call Him Jesus.

How does this work for those situations and more listed earlier? I can’t say. I do know that I have seen people who don’t confess Him as Lord that seem to have heard and heeded His voice in their hearts far more than people claiming a Christian faith.

For me, I know that I was fortunate to have been raised in the Christian faith and encouraged to pay mind to the gospels. I’ve studied scripture to try and understand as much as I can who Jesus is, what He taught, and how He lived. Which means I have a model to follow. And then by default a model I am called to set for those around me in my own life.

If I follow Him to my utmost, not making excuses to ignore His example because it's unpopular or inconvenient, I won't have to worry about whatever hell may or may not be. Along the way I trust that people will be inspired by a life lived in the genuine light of Jesus. And I hope they will also want to live into it because it's not only, maybe not even majorly, about the peace of mind for an afterlife. It's the peace that finds us each and every day and makes a difference in the lives of those who need it the most.

At the end of the day, leave the judgment to God. Live into Christ and know that whatever follows in the next world takes care of itself as God is faithful to those who are faithful.