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2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON 'Shining a Light: Rage & Calm' Matthew 12:24-37, Proverbs 29:11, Ephesians 4:25-27

This week I thought I had the message tied up early and had been rehearsing it through the week. Then sometimes things smash you between the eyes and everything gets derailed. This was one of those weeks.

Trying to keep it as tidy as possible, I'm simply going to remind us that we are looking through the colors of the light spectrum and seeing how the mythology of the Green Lantern syncs up well with our faith and spirituality. Each color represents a different trait or emotion we experience as humans.

This week is red. Red, unsurprisingly, is the color of anger, or more specifically rage. The corps of lanterns that wield this power are beings who at their core have an unquenchable rage. They are bent on retribution and vengeance. As you might suspect these are not individuals you'd want to trifle with. Some might even say they have a bit of a hair trigger temper.

Their leader is called Atrocitus. His name says it all and is a clue to where rage originates. An atrocity is something horrible. Often those with great rage are those who have had atrocities occur in their lives. Unfortunately when people have great rage they also commit great atrocities on others.

Scripture has a little to say about anger. Proverbs warns against it. Ephesians tells us that we can be angry, just don't sin in the midst of it. Anger is a normal feeling. It's what we do with it that matters. Indeed the motivation for some of the greatest change in our lives and the world begins with anger over something that isn't correct.

Ephesians reminds us to not go to bed angry. Doing so can cause anger to cement into bitterness and grudges. When this happens anger can become so familiar we don't remember what it's like to not have it. It's those moments where we've been angry for so long we can't even remember what we were originally angry about.

Anger has another unfortunate byproduct. It's well known that there is a psychological reality at play. The angrier we get, the dumber we get. As anger rises, our ability to make good choices goes down. Most of us have experienced this saying or doing something we later regret because it's been in the heat of anger.

This little tidbit is important as we move forward. It's what people play on to manipulate us by stoking anger in our hearts and minds.

What we need to focus on this morning is anger as it pertains to faith. Sometimes you may hear the term "righteous anger" or "righteous indignation". This is assigning my anger to God, or in other words stamping Jesus' approval on my anger. Then what I say and do as a response also has God's approval.

The result is hateful, abusive, and dishonest practices levelled claiming Jesus as the co-author.

He isn't. Using Jesus' name for unChristlike values, words, and actions isn't faith. It's blasphemy.

Understand, there are things to be upset about. God was angry, especially in the Old Testament. It was kindled through faithlessness that was evidenced in how people acted.

From Isaiah 58

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

9 Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

From Proverbs 6

There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him:

17 haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood,

18 a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil,

19 a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

These are all things that anger God. They are also things that Christians run headlong into when stoked to anger mixed with purpose. Lying. Arrogance. Stirring up trouble in the community. Harming the innocent. Letting the needy go hungry. Siding with the ones stepping on others.

We'll see why in a moment. But one more important piece from Jesus Himself. He got angry. His greatest anger was against religious leaders and people who guided God's people in the wrong path.

33 "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

Note this. He isn't speaking to the sinning non-believer but the seemingly upright religious. They have traded their faithfulness for something else. I would imagine it wasn't unlike today. There are always spiritual ways to express evil things. There are always holy sounding ways to communicate what is the opposite of Christ.

I was reminded of this a couple days ago. I am angry with myself for having participated in what I'm going to share. What I'm about to share is also why you hear me often caution what you take in regarding Christian teaching. It's also why some of the most unfaithful messaging happens on Sunday mornings in places with pews and crosses.

For decades now there has been a movement in Christianity that has done harm to the message, to those seeking Jesus, and victimized people in Jesus' name. It goes hand in hand with the way Christianity has been turned political. And why people confuse Jesus and public figures.

There is too much faith that has stoked anger in the hearts of Christians for the purposes of manipulation and control.

When I was cutting my teeth in youth ministry, there was a huge teen ministry outlet called Teen Mania. They had huge, mega productions that brought thousands and thousands of teens together to inspire them in worship. It was energetic, contemporary, and passionate.

Most all of us bought into them hook line and sinker. They were "saving a generation" for Christ to change the world. What came out was that this "ministry" was exploiting teens by using them as unpaid labor in harsh, unforgiving working conditions. They would "train" their teen "elite" through boot camps and programs that were abusive physically, psychologically, and spiritually. And their messaging intentionally stoked anger at the world and anyone who was different than they were.

The man at the head of all of this was quite literally motivated to reach youth for Christ when he encountered what he noted as "angry Jesus". This spoke to him and anger is what he pushed.

Churches at the time and today jumped on this bandwagon. Mixing it with the political arena made it even more insidious because now it wasn't just tied to fear and anger in faith. It was tied to fear and anger for country.

Wording that is still common like "enemy", "soldier", "warrior", and "taking back" became buzzwords. "On fire for Christ" was just a buzz term for being willing to be in someone's face, willing to pick a fight about any number of issues, and then claiming victimhood or persecuted when someone didn't agree or dared to speak back at you.

Christians were called to "convert" people. What that amounted to was getting them to agree with your version of Jesus. And if people couldn't be converted then let's get into places of power to force folks to act the way we think they should act.

What this then did was draw battle lines. One of their big movements was literally called "battle cry" and the productions were laced with military vehicles, guns, and the fear that here in America Christians would be the hunted by military force.

It gave a narrow set of values and morals that you could use to identify who was "really" a Christian. The rest were enemies to be converted or conquered.

All of this pushed an anger at a world people were told was out to get Christians. It was "war" language. And in war there are two emotions that are paramount. Fear and anger. When these two combine do you know what you get? Rage.

Christians were, and still are, manipulated by man made standards that don't reflect the Jesus of the gospels. They are pushed to be angry at the world and afraid of it. Then there is the perception that we're somehow the upright holy warriors fighting for spiritual rightness.

The result is anything is a means to an end. The end is wanting to have the power to force a limited agenda that is as much political as it is anything remotely Christian. And what is claimed to be Christian typically isn't rooted in sound Biblical interpretation.

It is anger and fear disguised as righteousness, "fiery faith", and without saying it out loud, a holy war.

Unfortunately because it is rooted in anger and fear, this holy war has caused large patches of Christianity to lose its soul.

Christians are looking to “gain the whole world” at any cost. Jesus said “what good is it to gain the world and lose your soul?”

Here is one of the most significant tells. There are many Christians today who have a strange persecution fantasy. Back in the 90s and early 2000s this was a thing of wild proportions. Literally Teen Mania capitalized on the tragedy at Columbine not to push a sense of worry and concern for kids to be safe at school. It took a turn towards recruitment and pushing that wanting to die because of their faith was something to passionately aspire to and pursue. Martyrdom wasn't regrettable. It was chic.

And yet...

Those same voices jockeyed and continued to jockey for power to force the world to behave like Christians because they are afraid that as Christianity loses prominence it means that persecution is knocking at the door.

Excuse me? They want it but will compromise any Christian principle to ensure it doesn't happen.

How does this happen? It happens because there are some smart leaders who understand that when anger goes up, intelligence goes down. And once people are afraid and angry, raging, it's very easy to attract them and grow their numbers if you present your message and yourself as the answer to the very same fear and anger you yourself cultivated.

Give a stringent criteria of what morals and values identify you as one of the elite and chosen fighting for Christ and now there's one more layer. I get to be better because I not only have this special knowledge, but I fight for it aggressively against anyone who disagrees.

Then give spiritual, mental and emotional whiplash by one day praising how special someone is and the next screaming about how worthless they are because they are sinners beyond comprehension.

And when someone breaks your code or questions one step too far, remove them. Put them out and count them among the enemies.

These are the leaders that Jesus would have His finger in their faces today. Why?

Jesus wasn't a warrior. He wasn't a steamroller. He didn't ask the disciples to compromise their love and compassion to force others into some contrived conversion or belief. When the disciples were frustrated at those who opposed them they asked if they should call down heavenly fire to destroy their opponents.

It says that Jesus scolded them. Of course that wasn't the answer. Preaching love, mercy, compassion, and repentance loses every ounce of its power when it is accompanied by bullying, aggression, force, and silencing opposition simply because they are opposition!

It loses even more when it hurts the very people Jesus called us to love and help.

THIS is what made Jesus so angry about these religious folks then. I believe it brings about His anger and disapproval now.

Christ was the Savior precisely because He didn't go along with the worldly way of doing things. He hung on the cross and forgave everyone who put Him on it. He healed even when the religious people told Him it was wrong to do it on a Sabbath. He fed the hungry even when the disciples told Him they couldn't possibly help all those people. He sat with the outcast Samaritan woman even when His friends wondered why on earth He would lower Himself to such a position.

This kind of love is what changes the world. Nothing truly changes by being forced. It changes by choosing to accept and embrace a better way.

The first step is always taken by the better way. Jesus came and embraced the world in all its ugly and sin. He didn't return the same. He decided to show what it looks like to do things differently.

Did He get angry? Yes. Then He loved and showed the world how to handle that anger in a way that demonstrated His message in real time and real action. Was He afraid? Yes. The night before the cross He was terrified. Then He went forward in love and mercy even though it meant sacrifice.

This is the soul of our faith. This is how we reclaim it. Don't be idle when you hear the kind of faith spoken that is about pitting us against them. That is driven by anger and frustration rather than heartfelt love that wants to welcome everyone in a common journey seeking God together. That is about dismissing or ushering the “other” to the side because they are different.

Remind whomever of the Jesus that saved them. That loved them enough to extend grace and mercy. That as scripture says “died for us while we were still sinners”. That spoke up against the judgmental while He stood alongside the judged with compassion.

In reminding others of this, we remind ourselves of the wonderful assurance we have in serving a God that came to us this way. We also have assurance that being world changers is best served by living the example, inviting rather than coercing, and being a true reflection and imitation of Jesus Christ.