

SEPTEMBER 21, 2025

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Sermon Sept 14 "Turn Turn Turn" Ecclesiastes 11:7-10, Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

This week is another message inspired by request. The specific verses that were mentioned are Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8. We took just a hair more in the passage and jumped to the end of the book as well.

The passage itself is well known. If not from the Bible many know it from the popular song the Byrds released in 1965.

Ecclesiastes is an interesting book. So much so that picking verses out of it without considering the tone of the whole book is bound to lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretation.

Ecclesiastes is considered a book of wisdom. Proverbs is the better known in this category, but you see similarities between the two. Both include short, punchy sayings driving a practical sensibilities from inspired spiritual truths. They are written in verse, as if in poetry.

That they are poetic reminds us that literal readings are often misreadings. Exaggeration and use of extremes are devices to make a more real point. Going to the exaggeration misses the point. For example, the writer says in 9:7 to Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do.

Cherry pick this out and suddenly I have a reason to party as if that's my life's work. Food? Eat plenty. Wine? Drink up! God approves it! Clearly this isn't the point. Dial it back and we recognize in context that we serve a God that desires us to enjoy the life that we have. Not to do nothing but party and indulge.

The book as a whole is very much thoughts about the point of living. In some ways it can read a bit glum. The writer tells us that he has tried just about everything. He's experienced the extremes of contrasts in life. And you know what? It's all pointless. The expression often quoted is that "all things are vanity".

He says this because in his estimation we all have one unifying factor. We all die. Once we have passed on, we have absolutely nothing to do with whatever we leave behind. It is left completely to chance and whatever other people choose to make of it. I can leave something incredibly meager and another will make something extraordinary of it. I can leave something extraordinary and someone can squander and destroy it just as easily.

So what's the point?

A couple tidbits the writer shares is that at the very least he's found that wisdom is better than foolishness. He's also learned that the extremes bring nothing but trouble. His recommendation? Live in moderation with all things. Pretty sound advice if ever advice was given.

Yet even if this is true, we can't take it with us, it doesn't mean that life is empty or without purpose. At the end of our chapter 3 passage some things are highlighted. Enjoy life. Find joy and satisfaction in your work. Do good.

Even if we don't know what comes next because life is unpredictable, Chapter 11 says

Ship your grain across the sea;

after many days you may receive a return.

2 Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight;

you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.

Sow your seed in the morning,

and at evening let your hands not be idle,

for you do not know which will succeed,

whether this or that,

or whether both will do equally well.

In other words, we have no idea what the future holds. All we can do is our best with what is in front of us and hope for the best. Could something fail? Sure. Could it succeed wildly? Yes, it could. We won't know if we don't do our utmost and try.

Before moving to 3:1-8, however I'd like to share two things. The first I am quoting a funeral director I got to know well up above Scranton. His take on inheritance and his church was very "Ecclesiastes".

He'd seen a lot in his day of what happened in families who were working through the passing of a loved one. Every few years his church asked him to speak to the congregation about planning ahead. This is what he told them:

"If you have a congregation and church that has ministered to you and helped your faith, and has served the community faithfully by showing the love of Jesus, consider leaving that congregation something. You have no

idea what will happen(there's the Ecclesiastes), but if you have a tried and true congregation serving God through generations it might be worth considering to keep that ministry going."

The second goes right to our celebration last week. We are on the foundation of what faithful men and women did to serve and minister. They didn't do it just thinking about themselves. They were building. In the words of Ecclesiastes they were "finding joy in their work" and they were "doing good". And they did it for the future. So that the faith they held dear would continue to be passed along to generation after generation.

This is our task now. We have work to do. The work done with the right people is truly joyful. In the end we don't know what will happen in 100 years. What we do know is that we are called to serve God now and ensure that whatever is in a century our work will be remembered well. Our work will build a foundation for others to grow from and build on themselves.

At the very end of the book we are reminded that God ultimately is the assessor of our work and lives. We work hard and well, do good, find joy, and when our time has come pray that God will judge our work kindly and with pride in the child standing before God.

The passage of contrasts helps us to set our expectations right so that we can do our work as well as we can, serving God and doing good.

Everything conceivable can and does happen. Don't be surprised. Laughing and crying, living and dying, killing and healing, all of them will happen. All of them have a place.

Going back to our beginning, we recognize that while all of these things occur, we can't assume that since they do that it is always in God's will. The New Testament bears this out. God doesn't want any of us to sin. That's a central issue for us. We make mistakes out of line with God's will and need redemption. Jesus is our answer for that.

The point is that most of the things that happen can be the result of God's will or sin. Laughter can be beautiful and an outpouring of God. People can also laugh at abuse and bigotry because they agree with those values. People cry because they are mourning loss or suffer a failure. This is normal. People also cry because they have sinned or because someone else's sin has hurt them. The same behavior or event can be the result of either.

Recognizing that everything is going to happen helps us accept that they are all part of life. It doesn't mean we resign ourselves that everything has to happen as it does. This is part of the work before us.

It is up to us to find fulfillment in our work, AND ensure that the work we do is in line with God and the example of Christ.

Knowing that everything that is going to happen is part of life also reminds us that no matter what happens God is present with us. God's love is present. God's direction is present. God's approval and disapproval are present. When we do wrong God's grace and forgiveness are present.

In every moment God is there.

How do we embrace these extremes that fall into most all of our lives at some time or another? Because even if what happen isn't what God desires, God is still there to help us through anything that happens.

The meaning we find in the good and the bad is a matter of perspective. Do we seek God in it all? Do we try genuinely do our best to imitate Jesus no matter what life throws at us? Do we seek to stand before God, the one who will assess the work of our lives, as blameless as possible and with the most Christlike body of work we can offer?

Ecclesiastes is all about doing our best before God in the midst of the unpredictability, and yes, even sometimes futility we feel in life. To find satisfaction in what we do. To know that there isn't anything God hasn't seen before, yet God still seeks us, loves us, and redeems us knowing everything we are capable of from the worst to the greatest.

I would offer one more thought. When we look at the work of our lives, there is another reality at work. The only one I can control is me. The only one you can control is you. At the end of my day, at the end of my life I can only do my best. That satisfaction is what brings a peace of God in the heart.

What you do is important to me. We rely on one another to make the best and most of our lives and world. Still, the only one we are accountable for before God is ourselves.

I had to learn this young. I was a good ball player, often on a bad team. I'd do my best, made the all star team for the league pretty much every year. But we'd still lose. So I had to learn to do my best and let that be good enough regardless of the outcome.

I feel like there's an Ecclesiastes message in there.

Together, if we all do our level best to live into the purposes of Jesus Christ we can build something that has the best chance of not falling to the futility the writer of Ecclesiastes warns about. We build a platform that continues to stretch forward, proclaiming the gospel to generation after generation in word and deed.

Mark 2 is a chapter all about the authority of Jesus. As in chapter 1 the stories are relatively fast pace with relatively minimum space taken to elaborate. Likely this is because Mark's gospel was written at a time when the reader/hearer might already have a more firsthand sense of traditions and stories of Jesus. Not unlike we do today, a reference can be made to a commonly known incident with the intention being more about making a point. What is unknown to a much later reader is known to the reader when the work was originally written. An interesting little trivia point is that while we know Him as Jesus of Nazareth, Mark drops a tidbit in here. Mark calls Capernaum Jesus' home. That's where He lives. While tradition suggests the house the miracle is performed in belongs to Peter or his mom, this isn't specified. Just because I tend to be a little quizzical, my mind drifts to what it might have meant if it was Jesus' roof that got damaged!

For simplicity's sake with the chapter, we'll break it down into the authority that Mark is emphasizing for Jesus. Authority to Forgive Sin

The healing miracle isn't a new aspect to Jesus. Chapter 1 already establishes this power and that it drew large crowds. That's why they were gathered at the house to begin with. The story, while dramatic in healing, is not about Jesus' healing power. It's about His forgiving authority.

Rather than announcing the healing Jesus announces forgiveness of sins. Some suggest that He had a supernatural ability to read the hearts of the religious leaders there. That might be true. At the same time don't dismiss that we all have had such moments.

We are in a room, in the midst of a conversation or circumstances and without a word we know what people are thinking. There are uncomfortable shuffles. Smirks. Eye rolls. Smiles. All kinds of "tells" that let us know what's on someone's mind. Jesus picks up that already they are judging Him. Not only judging Him but condemning Him. To charge with blasphemy is a death sentence.

In a wonderfully sarcastic moment Jesus asks them a question. Paraphrased it might look something like this: "You saw what I just did right? This guy has been crippled for how long and now he's going to walk. I did that. You tell me what is easier, to pronounce forgiveness with my lips or heal this lifelong affliction."

The miracle is the sign of Jesus' identity. The miracle demonstrates that Jesus isn't your ordinary person. He's got divine authority and power. So yes, He CAN forgive sins.

Further is the term Son of Man. Mark uses this to label Jesus as born of and being human. He is flesh and blood like all the others around Him. At the same time this label carries with it the weight of authority. He may be a man but He is also so much more. He wields power that no other person does. He is unique among humankind.

Keep in mind also that this distinction is important to the people then. The fullness of our doctrine of the Trinity wasn't solidified until 300 years later through lots of argument, study, experience, and conversation among faithful believers. At this time the whole sense of how God, Jesus, and the Spirit wasn't fully conceived. For Mark to clarify that this is a man with special features would have been understandable and even necessary.

Authority over Social and Religious Convention

Next we are once again by a lake, the site of calling the first disciples. Once again we see a call. The point is identical. Mark isn't concerned with whatever the fullness of the interaction is between Jesus and Levi. The only thing that matters is that in the end Jesus calls and we answer.

The much larger picture here is that Jesus hung out with folks the Pharisees deemed unworthy of attention or concern. The "sinner" was a person identified with biased sensibilities by the religious folks. They labeled professions, behaviors, etc. as "worse than" and therefore those people could be dismissed, ignored, judged, perhaps even condemned. The LAST thing you did was associate with them.

Yet there's Jesus. Eating and chilling with them.

The Kingdom of God was attached to Jesus. That Kingdom wasn't just there for the observant "less sinny" Jews who came to Him. He would bring it to the lowest of the low. The dirtiest of the dirty. Did He approve of everything they did? Of course not! He still wouldn't leave them out. They are also God's children. They are also God's desire. So they are Jesus' as well.

We can learn a lot from this story. Churches today have lots of rules. They also have identified people who "don't belong", who are "too dirty", or who aren't welcome unless they become like the rest of the people in the church. I think Jesus would have a lot to say about that.

To the religious folk here Jesus talks about coming for the sick in need of healing. The backhanded message is that everyone is sick and in need of healing. We are all sinners. The problem comes with those of us who think we're "better than", or perhaps more aptly put see others as "not good enough". The "not good enough" often find themselves on the "in" with Jesus while the religious and confident in truth are on the "out" with Him.

Food for all of us to chew on.

Here Jesus shows that He can break the social and religious conventions. He has that authority.

### Authority over Tradition/Disciplines

The next incident has questioning over fasting. Even John's disciples fast! This is where they agreed with the Pharisees. Likely the expectation was to fast two days a week. Yet Jesus and His followers didn't fast at all. Why?

Jesus uses the bridegroom image. He is coming to wed all humanity to God through Himself. I liken His ministry to the courtship while the "bride", the church or the people, wouldn't fully commit to the relationship until after the resurrection. Regardless, this time of Jesus' ministry is the wedding.

At a wedding to refuse to eat, to fast, was an insult. When the celebration is at hand...celebrate. When Jesus is here to teach, to heal, to love, to live, and ultimately to redeem, celebrate! Like the wedding, after the party there will be plenty of time for the grit of reality. The disciples will fast. They are good, observant Jews. They will fast when it is appropriate, and that time is not that moment.

To pinpoint the issue Jesus uses the familiar illustration of the wineskins and the old and new cloth. Much has been made of symbolizing these objects. We'll make it simple.

The old way of thinking, the old structure of a hard and fast legalism can't contain the covenant of grace and love that Jesus brings. You have to get rid of that whole old way of thinking in order to embrace Jesus' way. The two can't hold together.

The Law had been misappropriated. Loopholes could be found. Excuses could be made. Not with Jesus. Jesus says love. Period. No excuses. No loopholes. So don't try to jam it into an old system that tries to make that possible. Jesus' "new wine" will obliterate that "old wineskin".

Jesus is demonstrating here that He has the authority to appropriate traditions and disciplines including the sacred practice of fasting.

### Authority over The Commandments

In this final story Mark relates Jesus and His disciples being scolded for breaking the Sabbath by picking heads of grain. He replies with an answer that reverses importance in important ways.

David is lesser than Jesus yet David committed a potentially more egregious offense. The sacred bread was far more important than some simple heads of common grain. Yet the lesser David made the "greater offense" in eating that bread. Here the greater Jesus makes the lesser offense of daring to grab a little grain.

If they were fine with David's action, they shouldn't be surprised with Jesus.

Essentially Jesus reminds them that the day of rest was set aside to benefit the person. The person isn't there to serve the day of rest. Doing that actually creates more stress and work on the person, making the day of rest of no use. Human needs and necessities outweigh whatever notions of what constitutes "work" that these religious leaders have.

We see this all the time today. Arguably the Sabbath is wildly observed, used, and misused. People's definition of work varies. It is also incongruent. The example of Chick Fil A closing on Sunday is relevant. Christians applaud them as paragons of faith for giving their employees rest. Yet those same Christians go out to eat on Sunday, making other people still work to serve them. True respect for Sabbath in this regard would mean refusing to embrace anything forcing others to work because supporting it would mean supporting breaking the Sabbath.

Some have strict rules. Some work equally every day of the week. Some legitimately try to carve out a day of rest and do things that, for them, are genuinely invigorating, relaxing, and recharging.

Regardless, Jesus is making a point about the purpose of the command. This is not unlike the Sermon on the Mount with His "you've heard it said by I say to you" statements.

Jesus has authority to clarify and enforce the commandments through God's lens rather than that of humanity.