

NOVEMBER 9, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON “A Great Cloud of Witnesses” Hebrews 11:1-23, Hebrews 12:1-3

This morning is a big service. We have a lot of very heavy, but good, things involved. Communion and All Saint’s Day on the same Sunday. We’re going to try and briefly bring it all together.

Key to all of this is the root of our word “communion”. We are communing in beautiful and grand form this morning.

To commune is more than just hanging out with someone. There is great intention in the moment. There is an intimacy and a vulnerability on the part of everyone involved. We offer ourselves uniquely and we draw the other in just as uniquely. We experience one another on a deeper, more connected level.

In taking communion we commune with God. Offering ourselves in confession, humility, and gratitude we also take in the powerful mercy and grace of God. The love of God poured out on the cross is a reminder of just how beloved we are by our Creator.

We commune with one another in physical space. Our intention is shared, our hearts are in common with that gratitude and humility. The disciples on Pentecost were together in “one accord”. As we mirror this the Holy Spirit is invited into our midst in significance and power. When we are united together this becomes more than sharing some bread and juice. It is brothers and sisters as the body of Christ coming together.

Finally, in our tradition we encourage congregations to receive communion the first Sunday of the month. We commune in spirit with millions of other believers around the world on this day in an experience that unites us in faith.

As we remember those who have passed this past year, and those that have gone before us, we also enter another sort of holy communion. This is the “great cloud of witnesses” we read about in Hebrews. Hebrews 11 is often referred to as the “hall of fame of faith”. We read over and over “by faith Abraham, Jacob, Abel, Noah, Moses, Rahab” and so on did what they did and God looked on them favorably.

Their stories continue to echo thousands of years later, inspiring the faithful of today. We commune with them in spirit as we take in the best of their examples.

There are two things that unite these people in many ways. First, none of them were perfect. All of them messed up, some more spectacularly than others. That’s life. That’s being human. Despite their faults, their faith stood out and linked together as part of the age to age chain imparting faith to generation after generation. The intent was for that chain to stretch forward through time calling humanity to do the will and work of God in the world. To bring the world closer to God’s Kingdom.

The second is that all of them acted in faith not knowing what was coming next. They followed God, trusting that they were part of something bigger. Abraham especially models this. He was promised descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. He never lived to see it happen. He never lived to see his people enter any sort of promised land. Yet he followed God.

His role wasn’t to see everything first hand. His role was to simply do his part to accomplish God’s design. If he did his, and those that followed did theirs, then God’s hand would be seen in the world. It wasn’t just about him and his time. It was about all those who would follow.

Abel had a similar but very different sense of things. At the very beginning his faith caused him to follow God just on God’s say so. “Bring me an offering”, and he did. He just followed instructions and the result was pleasing to God. All he could do was what was asked. He couldn’t possibly know that soon after Cain would murder him in a jealous rage. For Abel the important thing was to do what was correct.

That’s all any of us can do. Follow God with intent and integrity. If we do that, we lay down at night knowing we’ve done our part. Whether we pass that night or in a hundred years we do so with a content heart having honored our faith in God. We are a link in a chain the moves from the first to put their faith in God into eternity. Like those in the book of Hebrews our privilege and duty is to make certain that our link in the chain is strong.

Throughout the scriptures and history there have been people who have claimed to live in faith before God. Saying it doesn’t make it so. Through Israel’s story there were prophets and kings who had power and influence. They claimed to follow God and led the people after them. They ultimately led the people to ruin because their actions didn’t match their words.

These folks aren’t included in this great hall of fame of faith. They belong to a cloud of witnesses that we’d rather forget and certainly not imitate.

It's up to each of us which cloud we commune with.

This cloud of witnesses is at the heart of our celebration today. Hebrews lays out heroes of faith in the scriptures. They weren't laying out the New Testament heroes because the New Testament was in the process of being written at the time. Yet we count the disciples and apostles as part of this great cloud of witnesses. This cloud has grown and grown through the ages as men and women have lived their faith with purpose, humility, and integrity.

Those we love and know that pass in our own lifetime and have lived a life of devotion join this cloud of witnesses. The faith, the stories, and the inspiration grows with every soul added to the Kingdom of God in eternity. As we drink in their example, their inspiration, their faith, their legacy we commune with them all in our heart and spirit.

One day we hope to join this great cloud ourselves. But there is a cost.

As we celebrate communion today please be reminded that redemption is not a prize to be earned. It is a gift freely given. Our lives bear out whether or not we have accepted that gift.

While redemption is grace given, legacy is an honor earned.

So often when we celebrate the memory and life of one that we love I hear awe and wonder in the stories shared. There is a very real sentiment that we hope one day we too will be remembered so well. We hope that people will gather in gratitude for what we have given to this world. We hope that the church will ring with stories of how our faith blessed our families, friends, and communities.

We hope to be remembered as part of this great cloud of witnesses.

For this to happen we must live a life worthy of that kind of praise. We must embody the love we've received. We have to be the example of faithfulness that inspires the generations coming behind us. The story we write with our lives has to be worthy of joy and praise by more than people. It must be worthy of those coveted words from the Lord "well done good and faithful servant."

In the end it isn't me that gets to pronounce the faithfulness of my life. It is those that remain and the God that I will stand before.

On All Saints' Day we are reminded that the most powerful stories in this cloud of witnesses come from the ones whose lives touched our own the most directly. The ones we experienced for ourselves firsthand. They show us God's hand in our own time and circumstances.

Commune with this witness that is recorded in scripture and continues to be written to this very day. Let it inspire to live a life of similar faith that brings the love of God, revealed in Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit into the world around us.

As we celebrate Communion today, let it be a time of special significance. Commune with the grace of God presented on the cross. Commune with the memories of those we honor today. Commune with each other in this common journey we are all on together. Let it inspire us to draw together bolder, more faithful, and more determined to spread the love of Jesus.

Then, one day, we will join the great cloud of witnesses with a legacy that will carry this faith and purpose from this age to the next.

Mark 8 continues to move beyond the short bursts of accounts we saw earlier in the gospel. In this chapter the accounts are still interconnected. They are just longer.

First we feel a little *deja vu*. It's another feeding of thousands. Again there is not nearly enough to feed the crowd, Jesus multiplies it, and a lot of extra is gathered.

We see that Jesus' popularity is growing, as are attention spans. This particular crowd has been with Him for three days. He is concerned for their well being trying to travel without sustenance. Mark notes that many "travelled a long distance" to see Him.

There is some speculation that this might have had a decent Gentile population. Mark puts this story right against the story of the Syrophenecian woman with the sick daughter. She talks to Jesus about the Gentiles getting the "crumbs" left behind from the "children", the Jews. If this is a continuation of this Jesus is living into the sense that He has come for both Jew and Gentile, even if to the Jews first. He is feeding both.

When they finish and depart, the disciples are still missing large chunks of symbolic meaning in these events. Here it is bread and yeast. All they can focus on is the physical meal. They aren't seeing a bigger picture.

We today understand that bread is a metaphor for the Word of God, the Bread of Life. Jesus is demonstrating through a physical feeding miracle that even whatever meager understanding the disciples have, if offered to a spiritually hungry crowd, is sufficient. It will be received, it will fill and uplift, and it will accomplish far more than they can dream.

The Pharisee interaction leads to the yeast confusion. They confront Jesus and ask for a sign. Note that thus far in Mark Jesus has performed miracle upon miracle. The Pharisees know this and are out to get Him. It's not that no sign has been given. It's that no matter what sign is given they will not accept His teaching. They will not accept Him.

We've all experienced this. People willfully refusing to learn. Views and behaviors have been so indoctrinated for so long that changing is unthinkable. It is frightening. It feels like betraying self and everyone who's raised you. No proof will ever be good enough.

This is a sad reality for Jesus and a caution for us. Can we take in new understanding when it is in line with Christ's genuine and authentic teaching? Or will we be like the Pharisees so stuck in our ways that we'd rather be wrong and deny Jesus than be humble in order to get right with God?

On the heels of this interaction Jesus warns about the "yeast" of the Pharisees and Herodians. Remember that earlier these were the two groups named in cahoots and plotting against Jesus because of His growing influence and popularity.

The references to who others say Jesus is later on falls into this as well.

The understanding of yeast to them was that it was something that brought decay in the bread. It was an impurity. This explains why all leavened bread had to be taken out of the home at Passover. Nothing impure or promoting decay could be allowed in the celebration.

The disciples are still focused on the bread. They had a loaf. Jesus had shown twice a lack of food meant nothing. Yet they couldn't see beyond their stomachs or simple understanding.

Jesus is warning them against being persuaded away from Him by these groups who not only failed to understand but actively sought to undo Him.

There isn't resolution. We just bump to the next scene that bleeds into the following one.

A blind man is healed. Grossly so with being spit on, but healed nevertheless. It takes two goes in order for it to take fully. The first touch he sees but unclearly. The second and he sees with clarity. What's up with this? Is Jesus not powerful enough? Is there something with the man? There are several explanations. I'd like to offer two. One that bridges backwards and the other directly forward.

The healing here is similar to Jesus healing the deaf man. Earlier Jesus talks about having ears that can't hear and eyes that can't see. It is likely Mark is linking these two healings to remind us that those who can't see or hear aren't doomed. They can gain vision and understanding if they allow Jesus to touch them and open their hearts.

Casting immediately forward we see that Peter and likely the rest of the disciples recognize Jesus as the Messiah. The conflict arises when Jesus explains what this means. He spells out His suffering and death. And resurrection.

Peter is on the receiving end of some harshness. Why? In the culture of that time the relationship between student and teacher, disciple and master was not equal. You didn't call out your teacher. To do so was a serious offense. Thus Jesus' hard response to Peter's "rebuke".

The reference to Satan wasn't necessarily calling Peter the devil incarnate. Satan is simply the challenger, the accuser, the one who speaks against the things of God. The devil was clearly this in the temptation of Christ in the wilderness. Here Peter has heard God's will and is trying to persuade Jesus against it. Thus Jesus' response.

What is revealed is that the disciples, like the first round of healing in the blind man, see. They see but not clearly. They have identified Jesus as Messiah. That's a start. They don't understand what that really means. They still see Him as a conqueror, not a sacrificial lamb. If He dies He is no different than the other false messiahs they have seen.

Not only is His role as Messiah not complete until the death and resurrection, they won't have the clarity of it until they witness the death and resurrection.

As such they don't understand the term Messiah even though it's correct. He wants them to keep quiet because if they go spouting off with their present understanding they are spreading misinformation. Even if well intended, they will mislead people. They aren't ready to speak about this until they grasp it.

Note that here when they miss it, Jesus tells them to be quiet. After the resurrection when they get it, Jesus tells them to make disciples of all nations.

Also, in reference to the healing, it isn't until the "second dose" of Messianic reality that they gain true clarity. Not only does the blind man require a double dose to get physical clarity, the disciples require a double dose to get spiritual clarity.

Mark also uses the term "Son of Man" rather than "Son of God". This is also telling in this chapter. A God doesn't get involved in the ugly, messy grit of actual life. They observe. They manipulate. They interject. They

do NOT experience it.

While we understand Jesus' divinity, the term Son of Man is a reminder that this God is unlike any other. This God gets in the mire with humanity. Experiences life. Is willing to suffer. Will not just be above us, but walks with us in solidarity. The title is an important one.

Finally there is a call to genuine discipleship. Jesus, though divine, is willing to take on the suffering of humanity. He is coming to serve and die for the sake of those He loves. A disciple must be willing to do no less. The price of salvation is the offering of our lives to the cause and work of Jesus Christ.

This is an important truth to keep in mind along with the promise of grace through faith. Yes, we are saved by grace. At the same time, Jesus never separates faith from our actions. For Jesus our actions define our faith. If our actions are contrary to Jesus our faith is not in Him. If our actions are nonexistent so is our faith. Jesus is setting the disciples up to know what they are agreeing to. He has confessed His suffering to come. He has invited them to participate in it. He has also offered the prize for doing so. The salvation of their souls.