

JANUARY 25, 2026

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON "Circles" 2 Samuel 12:11-14, Jeremiah 20:1-6

Up to this point in 2026 our messages have been about forging ahead faithfully and following the example of Christ. We looked back at 2025 to find hope and inspiration to go into the new year energized to invite all manner of people into our congregation and relationship with God through Jesus. We also recognized that faithful goal setting looks different for everyone. What is essential is that whatever we set our sights on underlying it is a closeness to God and awareness of what the Holy Spirit is calling us to.

This morning we tackle something that is vital to whether or not we are able to do any of this with consistency. We are talking about our circles of influence.

First we have to understand that a circle of influence isn't the same as circles of relationships, though they are connected. There are people with whom we are in face to face relationship frequently that we don't allow influence over our values, beliefs, and lives. There are others we see infrequently and can be half a state, country, or world away that we allow tremendous influence over those same things.

We also need to understand that in our faith we have to be strong enough to realize that circles overlapping with those disagreeing with us is not only inevitable, it's necessary.

Without contacting those who are different, the "other", the genuine gospel never reaches those who need it the most. Without engaging those who think differently we are never challenged to look at our own beliefs, values, and choices. What is right remains right but what is wrong will also remain wrong.

Our world is filled with people more and more who warn us against listening to "the other side". They are the enemy to be destroyed not have discussions. They are opponents to be conquered not fellow children of God to join in conversation. We can see where this is getting us as a world, and so having an openness to one another and willingness to engage is critical.

This brings us to our circles of influence. To put things in priority we go back to last week as Jesus talks about "hating family" if we are to follow Him. Our desire to hear and follow Him should put our loyalties to every other person or cause far in the rearview mirror.

In other words, everything we are deciding on is evaluated through the lens of Jesus. Difficult as it is we don't twist Jesus through the lens of our traditions, families, passions, or politics. Jesus informs all of those.

The Kings of Israel are a great example of circles of influence.

There seemed to be two kinds of kings and two kinds of influencers.

Jeremiah prophesied under 5 Kings of Judah. The most significant part of his work came under Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. Of the 5, 4 rebelled against his words with the result being exile to Babylon for the Kingdom.

This issue here is that Jeremiah wasn't the only prophet or priest. There were others. The King decided to let the false prophets into his main circle of influence. They told him what he wanted to hear and led him down all manner of bad choices that defied God and harmed the people he ruled.

Jeremiah was jailed and beaten for trying to tell the truth. The king didn't want the truth. He wanted what suited his desires and stroked his ego.

So we see here two influences. There are those who will encourage us to do what is right by God and those who will encourage us to do whatever satisfies our own desires and pride. They will tell us what we want to hear. What is unfortunate is that both will claim to be speaking on God's behalf. Which leads us to the kind of king, or in our case person.

There are kings who wanted the truth. They rewarded it. They could recognize when the prophet or priest was telling them the genuine words of God and when they weren't.

Then there are those who don't. They just want their own way.

For one God and the people they are set over to serve come before pride and self. For the other these flip.

Jehoiakim and Zedekiah wanted influences that benefitted themselves. David had people like Nathan. David certainly wasn't perfect, but he did want to know what God had in store. He did want God's will and to serve Israel well. Which is why we see his reaction to Nathan's harsh words against him.

He doesn't cry or wail. He doesn't punish Nathan. He receives the message and repents. He changes course and returns to God in faith and faithfulness.

Like the kings the false prophets served, their regard was themselves. They would take what they could get

while the getting was good. Flattering the king brought great reward. In too many cases going against the king brought punishment, as Jeremiah suffered in his day.

We are no different.

We have choices about who we allow to influence our lives, our faith, our decisions. We decide the circles of influence around us.

What do we consume in media and entertainment? What is the messaging? How do we process it? Do we allow it to pass through a filter of Christ or does it become the filter for how we see Christ? Do we have a discernment in not only what we consume, but how and why?

Is our life one big echo chamber? Do we only surround ourselves with voices like ours? Do we invite challenge and accountability? Do we seek people of integrity and character?

I remember a comedy bit about the kind of people we want in authority. The response was to those who say they want “someone like me” in authority. The response? “I don’t want someone LIKE me, I want someone BETTER than me!” Because I know my shortcomings and would rather someone with fewer shortcomings and more prominent graces be in charge.

The kinds of influence we have not only depend on how we seek them. It also depends on how we treat those influence when they offer their sensibilities up. If the only influence I receive with grace are those that make me feel good, agree with me, and stroke my pride, I won’t invite honesty. I won’t invite truth. I will invite the prophets that misled the kings in the days of Jeremiah.

If I welcome input with sincerity, humility, and gratitude no matter what it might be, I am far more likely to have truth spoken to me. Especially when it isn’t keeping with my own desires.

What do you want? Do you want the blind bootlicker that will say anything to make you smile, happy, and get your good side? Or do you want the honest voice of the Spirit spoken through someone looking out for you and those around you?

That should sound like an easy question. When it’s rubber meets the road time it’s not always so. People will tell us to say no when we want to say yes or yes when we want to say no. They will tell us we are wrong as well as right. But if they are Christlike all of it will be founded and offered in love.

The call of each of us is to be the voice of a Jeremiah or a Nathan. To receive God’s direction like David.

I was reminded this week of one of the measurements I’ve offered here for sorting through the voices around us. And the voice we speak into the world.

I’ve heard lots of things said with God’s name attached. I’ve seen lots of scriptural gymnastics trying to excuse people who lift their hands on Sunday for saying and doing reprehensible things. Here is the measurement that works only if it’s done in honesty.

Could I: 1. Hear Jesus say it?

2. See Jesus do it?

3. Hear Jesus support it?

If the answer is no then something needs to change. The more a single voice fails to meet this criteria, the less I should include it in my circle of influence. The more I should look for voices that do meet these criteria.

Do we want to truly invite people into a community that reflects the light of Christ? Do we want to truly be influenced by those who represent Jesus? Do I want to be one of those rare individuals who embodies the fullness of Christ to the world?

Sound like Jesus

Act like Jesus

Back what Jesus would back

BIBLE STUDY-Mark 16

Mark 16

The final chapter of Mark is divided into two parts. Verses 1-8 are the last verses of the earliest manuscripts of the gospel. Later, perhaps even a full century later, verses 9-20 are added.

The resurrection is critical for any gospel proclaiming Jesus as Messiah. Previous Messiah’s had come and gone. They did their work and mostly were killed for it. A Messiah dead and gone wasn’t much of a Messiah. Chapter 15 merges well into this one. The women noted at the end of 15 go to anoint the body. Why? We don’t know for sure in fullness. Certainly there were Jewish burial rites that needed to be observed. In most cultures there are traditions considered sacred when laying a loved one to rest. To not observe them feels incomplete, incorrect, and disrespectful. The burial was rushed, and so they may have wanted to ensure a proper burial.

Regardless, something that is noteworthy is that while the “disciples” had scattered these women remained. More than disciples, it might be considered that these women considered Jesus family.

Needing to anoint also gives reason to quickly return to the tomb and find it empty.

The angel gives a simple message. Peter is singled out. Once again we aren't told why. Is it because Peter has leadership standing? Is it because Peter had a special need to be reintegrated after his denials? Is it because many theorize that Peter was one of Mark's primary sources for the gospel and this is a way of giving a nod to him? We don't know. Speculation might be offered reading the other gospels, but those gospels weren't available to Mark.

The end just has the women running away afraid, not uncommon after an encounter with an empty tomb and an angel.

Mark may not have felt the need to go further. It was still somewhat early in the church, which means the stories were fresher. Obviously something followed the resurrection to inspire the founding and growth of the church and gospel. If the people around Mark already knew this stuff, recording it isn't necessary. They were living in the results of it.

And so the gospel ends. "He rose and we know what came next!"

The second portion being written later also makes sense. Looking at it through modern eyes gives a window. The longer after an event, the more we want to know. We don't have firsthand knowledge. We're not in the wake of the immediate follow up to the event. We want more to be satisfied. For people coming later that abrupt ending doesn't satisfy.

If we look at that later ending what we see is a brief summary of what comes through in the other gospels and Acts. Again, this makes sense. If this was offered after the introduction of the other gospels and Acts the summary doesn't need to get overly specific. It just needs to nod to things that would already be circulating.

Jesus appearing to two on a walk? The walk to Emmaus.

Jesus appearing to the 11? His appearances to the disciples, perhaps specifically when He enters a locked room and Thomas needs convincing. To that sense, I often argue that Thomas was just voicing what others were thinking.

What will His early ministers do? He tells them. Driving out demons? Acts. Speaking in tongues? Acts. Pick up snakes? Paul is bitten by a viper and unaffected in Acts. Healing the sick? Acts. The only thing that isn't accounted for is drinking poison. With this we don't know what stories were passed around and what trials believers endured. Perhaps some were convicted and asked to drink poison yet delivered from the effects.

The point is that this summary is accounted for by other New Testament writings. The later addition is more satisfactory and informed by other traditions and works familiar to those early Christians.

Important note. This reminds us that "taking up snakes" doesn't mean rattlesnakes in worship as a demonstration of faith. It is an affirmation of the signs done by the earliest apostles.

All of this is added to with the sense of redemption through faith, and the commissioning of the disciples.

For us as the gospel concludes there is a thread that weaves through it all, including these closing verses, the is incredibly encouraging to all of us even today.

The closest disciples of Jesus were dense and missing the point through His ministry. They even were slow on the uptake after the resurrection. "Stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen Him after He had risen" is a pretty strong statement.

Even His closest followers had doubts and difficulties. They had crises of faith. They had problems believing the unbelievable. Yet Jesus used them ultimately to spread His gospel and shake the world. Despite their problems, Jesus used them.

That's you and I. We have troubles. We have sin. We have doubts, questions, and faults. This isn't disqualifying. God can use us. The key to the disciples was continuing to follow and open up time and again to Jesus. This stubborn refusal to fall off paid off. They were gifted to do the work of God.

So are we. Drop your inadequacies. Drop your wondering if you can "do it". It's ultimately not about us. It's about the God we serve. If they can, we can. And we must if our world will become more like the Kingdom of Heaven.