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Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

BIBLE STUDY Haggai 1

The book of Haggai is quite short. Only 2 chapters. It is short but pointed with a lesson every believer can hear over and over as a reminder.

The backdrop is pretty simple. Judah had been exiled to Babylon. They were there some 70 years, pulled from their homeland. Some were left behind, but they were left in a destroyed land, sustaining as they could through those decades. Then through no small miracle in and of itself, they were given permission to return and rebuild. Keep in mind that earlier the Kingdom of Israel had been taken captive by Assyria in a far more complete manner and return was never an option.

They had returned, but had not been diligent about rebuilding and restoring the Temple of God.

Haggai's name means "born of the festival". There is some sense here as the chapter begins and ends marked by dates of worship and celebration. The first day of the month was often a time of higher worship and celebration. A good time to deliver a message to the people from God.

The end would have been around the Festival of Booths. Again, appropriate for the occasion. This festival is a harvest festival, making the references to their recent harvest results all the more relevant. It is also a festival honoring God's provision during the Exodus. Again, relevant as they are returning from exile to their home. Finally, there is relevance as this is one of three pilgrimage festivals in the Jewish faith. This is where the faithful would return to Jerusalem for celebration with the Temple as a focus point. A Temple in disrepair would be a shame and dishonor.

Haggai brings God's word. The people have returned but have become more consumed with their own comfort than with honoring God and God's house. According to the scripture, they were not having good returns on their harvests. They had drink and food but not as much as they would like or want. As a further exclamation point God says there will be a drought until they get their act together.

All of this was punishment for not honoring the House of God. The result of not honoring God was a lack of abundance and soon to be outright deprivation.

The governor, a man in the line of David, and the priest heard the call and got to work as this Festival of Booths came about. The remnant here isn't some "end times" remnant often referred to. It is referring to the remnant left/returned to Judah. It is this contingent that heard Haggai and responded by beginning to rebuild the Temple.

Keep in mind that Nehemiah had also returned and has his own book in the Old Testament. He rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem while Ezra reminded the people of the scriptures. Haggai calls upon Zerubbabel and Joshua to lead the charge on building the Temple.

This message is important today for two main reasons. We see congregations deprived of members and constituents, therefore shrinking. We also see congregations deprived of messages authentic to the Jesus of scripture and scripture itself.

They are different kinds of impoverishment, but impoverishment nonetheless. In Haggai they were deprived of food and drink. Why? Because they were more concerned with simply living a cushy life than with honoring God. They were content with their lot and whatever they felt constituted their faith. It was enough for them. In embracing this apathy and complacency they missed the fullness of honoring God in their time and culture. This was having the Temple in good order and repair.

Today we see the same thing. We get comfortable with our lives. We are happy with what we have. So long as our work provides income we have food, shelter, and drink. We have more provision than we need and it isn't dependent on the harvest locally and immediately as it was to those in ancient Judah.

In our contentment of life we can grow contented in faith. Suddenly the congregation, the community of faith becomes less critical. Support fades. Involvement declines. So long as it's still there when people want to darken the door to the individual "all is fine".

Except it's not.

As this grows, and as participation fades so does the ability of the congregation, the house of God, to provide the ministry necessary for the community of faith and community at large. Over time, little by little, the community of faith is impoverished in its support on all levels of time, talent, and treasure. And one day that congregation closes.

We see situations where a congregation requires a vote to close. The writing is on the wall. Yet out of nostalgia and selfishness people show up to vote to keep things open. Those same people then never actually participate, they just cast votes to keep the church of their youth and their mind alive for just a little while longer.

But it's not about enlivening the congregation. It's about preserving comfort in the mind and heart. It's about personal senses rather than a genuine corporate commitment.

It's like the Temple in Haggai's time, just packaged differently for a different age.

The other side is not a congregation falling apart, but perhaps even growing. It is a congregation that has a gospel that is no gospel at all. Instead the impoverishment is in the genuine call to love of God and love of neighbor.

These are congregations that tickle the itch that everything is personal. Everything is tailored and designed to cater to the individual. Everyone's life is about making the biggest splash for themselves even if it's at the expense of the world around them.

It's the gospel that is all about personal salvation with everything else "a la carte" as an option. Community involvement isn't a real heavy push because there's staff to take care of the leadership. And even if not explicitly stated it's understood that there are those deserving of our attentions and those who are not. There are the "ins" and "outs", with the "outs" to be demonized rather than sought after.

These are the hiding places for those who want to have a pick and choose menu of faith, and slip quietly into the background to avoid responsibility or commitment.

This is faith also impoverished. It's impoverished of unconditional love and compassion, of a fullness of interlocked community, of a gospel that calls us beyond ourselves to sacrificial love for the betterment of the world around us.

The impoverishment comes from catering to the "me first" mentality and putting Jesus simply on demand as a mascot or rubber stamp for our personal proclivities.

Just like in Haggai's time, the issue is self absorption over self giving to God and God's causes.

We don't have a "Temple" as they did then. We do have communities of faith. Impoverishment now might not be as clear as then. It's easy to feel when there's not enough food or drink. Many today still feel this pinch, though not for the reason outlined in Haggai. In much of our circles this pinch is light if at all.

The impoverishment comes at a direct toll to our spirits. We may not even sense it if we are surrounded by people that entertain a culture of self-centeredness and pass it off as still holy and Christ like. The danger here is far more perilous.

Like in Haggai's time, the danger is a corrosion of our relationship with God and our soul. When we don't perceive it, it can be a runaway issue difficult to correct once it's gone too far.

The call of Haggai rings today. The questions are present. How much do we value the House of God? What do we do to keep it in good repair? How much effort are we willing to put into making sure we have more than a sturdy building? Where will we commit to ensure that the message and the mission are Christ centered and intentionally bringing new people into a relationship with God through Jesus?