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# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*SERMON "A Moral Compass" 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, Exodus 21:18-25*

In Christianity today, morality is a big measuring stick for whether or not someone truly believes in Jesus. In fact, it's for many a measuring stick for whether or not someone is saved. Not the question of whether or not someone loves Jesus. The question of whether or not someone meets a short list of behaviors that a tradition, a pastor, or a person claiming Christ has determined. In other words, creating a new law rather than trusting in grace.

Morality is simply what is right and what is wrong. Typically we are talking about behaviors and in some cases viewpoints. It can be behavior towards one another or behavior when we are alone. All of it falls into right and wrong.

Most Christians will say that they get their idea for morality from God and specifically scripture. There is a very real sense that what is right has always been right and what is wrong has always been wrong. It is here we get in some muddy water.

I do believe there is right and wrong. I also believe that God is the author of what is what and we do look to scripture for that witness through the ages.

Unfortunately this isn't as clear cut as people want to make it sound and in that comes dishonest. It isn't fully honest to say our personal sense of morality comes from the Bible and God and that alone. All of us come to morality with a mix of faith, cultural, familial, and political views and agendas. All of that becomes our morality, and we will see in a moment that some of our morality doesn't agree with parts of scripture.

We also have to be honest that there are places where what was written means one thing and we take liberties by telling it what to say from our own modern perspective. A quick example is the term *Pornea*. This is sometimes translated "fornication" which is too narrow a term and sometimes "sexual immorality" which is so broad we can say it means whatever we want. In truth the writers had their own ideas in mind and that term could include a lot of different acts, even acts within the bonds of marriage. So as to not get too graphic, one of them is to not have sex on the Sabbath, or Saturday. That was included. Something tells me that we don't today hold to that expectation for married couples. And right there, boom, we have just reinterpreted morality for our own day and age.

Some will try to differ between the Old and New Testaments. Yet most of the things morally laid out in the Old were never repealed by the new. In fact modern Christianity often appeals to Old Testament Law to support claims on morality. This also goes hand in glove with the idea that right has always been right and wrong always wrong. From that we might rightly understand that the law regarding behavior was holding morality to account, and since it was handed down by God the punishments for breaking the Law must also be moral.

All that to say, allow me to ask some questions:

Is slavery morally right?

Is beating a slave to within an inch of their life morally right?

Is it morally right to execute an unruly child?

Is it morally right to execute a woman who isn't a virgin at marriage? How about to have a different standard for a nonvirgin man?

Is it moral to force a rape victim to marry her rapist?

Is it moral to get a tattoo or a piercing?

Is it moral to view an unborn child as nothing more than another piece of property?

According to scripture the executions were all not only correct but commanded. Tattoos and piercings were off limits. A rapist married his victim and the only consequence was having to pay an elevated bride price for "damaged goods." Slavery was fine as evidenced by there being a law for how badly you could beat a slave. Which destroys that argument that slavery was just another form of employment and not abusive. And as long as after a day or two the slave was still alive, no harm no foul. If a pregnant woman was struck in the course of an altercation and miscarried the penalty was simply a fine for damaged property. To them life didn't begin until the first breath. The only punishment came if there was injury done to the pregnant woman herself.

I'm guessing most of us have some very real disagreements with these senses of morality, and likely many more as well.

So why have we changed our sense of right and wrong? What happened?

There are many reasons given. Some say it's cultural context. Others say it's renegotiated in terms of Jesus. If the things we don't like are able to be reinterpreted, who gets to decide which morals get rethought and which ones don't?

And we can't qualify it as "because it's Biblical", because it's ALL Biblical.

.Keep in mind, I'm not saying there is no such thing as right and wrong, moral and immoral. Nor am I arguing that God doesn't have the final say. I'm simply reminding us that through the ages Christians have defined and redefined what is and isn't moral. All the time claiming it's God's rule even when it changes time and again.

The call here isn't to back away from looking for what is right. The call here is to be humble about how hard we hammer one another, particularly in places where there is genuine disagreement among faithful. Because of the specifics can be a little murky, there is a moral compass that is broad but clear. It comes from Jesus Himself.

All of the Law, in other words all the rules about what is right and wrong, are summed up by Love God and Love your neighbor as yourself.

The compass is simple. Love.

Is what is happening truly loving? Is it genuinely seeking the best for another? Is what I'm doing in my own private choices truly loving myself? Is the choice constructive or destructive. Is it filled with grace or judgment? Compassion or callousness? Forgiveness or bitterness?

Love isn't passive, always giving way and appeasing folks. Sometimes it says no. Sometimes it confronts. We do well to notice that where the confrontations came from Jesus it was against the religious that were being harsh, judgmental, dishonest, and manipulative in the name of God. Maybe even in the name of love.

The ones who broke the "moral rules" of these religious folks are the ones Jesus ate with, stood with, and welcomed to follow Him over and over again.

Morality wasn't about avoiding accountability. But loving accountability is about HOW something is disciplined. Accountability can be warranted but still immoral if it is merciless, overly harsh, and unloving in its execution.

I wish it were easier to put together a black and white list of rules that are unfailing. It would be easier to create a "new law". The vagueness of the simple term "love" creates its own issues. People have abused children terribly and justified it under "doing it out of love". People do all kinds of immoral things in the name of "love". So by no means is this any kind of guarantee.

Just like when we try to cherry pick our morals from scripture, sometimes we will get it wrong. Why? Because we're human and we make mistakes. And sometimes we confuse our sensibilities and God's.

This morning I simply want to suggest that when Christians make themselves the moral policemen of the world it's missing the point. It doesn't erase the need for moral standards, but it does get in the way of genuine transformation.

Our job is to introduce people to the One who guides us to a heart that wants to live rightly. To invite them to give themselves to the One who showed us what that right living looks like as He walked the earth to offer Himself as a sacrifice for all those things that we've done wrong.

Our job is to bring people into the presence of the God that we say is at God's core, Love. The more we embrace God and seek to live into that same love, not only will our sense of morality become clearer. We will also learn to treat those who disagree with us or break away from what is right with humility and grace. Even when accountability is necessary.

In all of this we find a greater peace. Peace with one another. Peace with God. Peace within ourselves. Because as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "if I don't have love, I have nothing." On the other side, perhaps we can also say that if we have the genuine love of Christ, and put it into practice, then we have everything.

The first portion of this book continues with visions. To keep things in a sort of perspective, there are back and forths with angels, workmen (the guy measuring the city), and so on. Getting caught up in this is not the point. It's vision language. There are bigger themes going on here.

The guy measuring Jerusalem is an object to make a point. Whatever he measures it's not enough. This is incredibly hopeful promise. The reason his work is futile is that what God is planning to do is bring the victory and prosperity of God's people to a point beyond what can be contained in the walls of a city. It will be epic.

Also, as God intimated in chapter one, the protection and heavy lifting isn't done by the people. It's done by God. Walls were necessary elements of protection, they don't need them when God is in the mix.

Who is invited? All of the exiles. Those in Babylon or in "the north" are called back. Judah and Benjamin. When the invitation is extended to Zion, all of Israel is welcomed. The Kingdom of Israel beforehand had been exiled to Assyria, with no release to come back home. Not Judah has been exiled to Babylon and given permission to go back. As Judah returns, the invitation is extended to all Israel. What is most likely isn't a grand migration back. Nevertheless, the Kingdom of Israel will have a portion that might straggle back home.

God's power continues to take center stage. How can they be secure? God tells them that the ones who "plundered" them will be overtaken by their slaves. They will be defeated.

There is the promise that other nations will live among them. That God Himself will live among them. Why? Here's some thoughts from our study.

If there is prosperity, people will come. Migration wasn't like it is today. Other nations might see the prosperity of God's people and want a piece of it. As we saw in chapter one, the understanding of the nations was that a god ruled over that god's territory. Pass from one territory to another you pass from one god to another. Just like you'd be expected to serve the king in the new territory, so you'd be expected to serve the god of that territory. Come to the people of God, worship God.

What about God inheriting Jerusalem? If God owns everything, how can God inherit anything? Here I appeal to the sense that through the ages, including the writing of the Old Testament, the people grew to understand God differently. Their faith evolved. This isn't bad or criticism. It's reality. As they experienced God and life they came to understand their faith in different sensibilities.

Consider in chapter one the notion that while the Persians were content to let nations return to their homes and their gods because that was convenient for control, there was a difference of opinion. Most nations understood their gods to only rule in their territory. Judah/Israel had come to see their God as ruling over all the earth.

Back to the time of Saul and David the grasp of the gods was that each god had their own nation to rule. This is why they had such a problem of idolatry. Other gods weren't just false ideas as we see them today. They were realities they had to contend with.

How did the god get their territories? By inheritance from one greater god who passed those inheritances out. Now things have changed. Language might reflect an old sense but there was a transition in thinking. In exile they had to rethink God and their understanding of God. God is now God of all. And that God is on their side in their rebuilding of both the city and the Temple.

There is a lot to take from this chapter. Two things I'll highlight. Evolution. God's patience and presence. First God's patience and presence. We see that despite time, disobedience, and hardship God remains with God's people. The invitation is open to begin things anew. I'd almost call it a "restart". If it's real for them it's real for us. We fall away. We make mistakes. This doesn't remove us from God's care. Over and over in my life, and many others, there has been an opportunity to hit a "restart button". Start clean. We'll see this more in the next chapter.

Second, evolution. To think our understanding of God doesn't evolve is profoundly arrogant. It means we have God all figured out and we don't. In the Old Testament, before Christ, this was a long and arduous track. How does suffering equate with God? How does success? Where does God reign? How do we understand this in the context of a world with so many other gods?

This is part of the story of the Old Testament. The people grow in understanding of God even as they go through nation building, being a nation, and handling the catastrophes that came to their nation. God becomes clearer and even clearer revealed in Jesus.

This is part of that journey and an affirmation that all of us are on a similar journey that we trust will one day result in the fullness of knowledge of God in God's presence.

This chapter focuses on Joshua, the High Priest. He is called to be a spiritual center and anchor for this “reset” of God’s people in their homeland, Temple, and city. Apparently even the heavenly court had questions... Satan here isn’t the devil. That understanding of Satan came later and is more New Testament. Satan here is the accuser. This is a role in God’s heavenly court. We see this in Job. We also see it in chapter one with the horses. They were to “patrol the earth”. Why? To bring reports back to God about what was going on. In and of itself, as we looked at last chapter, this gives pause about an evolution of our understanding of God. If God is omniscient why does God need beings to look at the world and “report back”? God doesn’t. We see God as knowing everything knowable and present everywhere. This is an example of how our understanding of God has changed.

Here this accuser is accusing Joshua. We don’t get the nature of the accusation. I might speculate that, given what follows, it’s about his unworthiness as a sinner. God has other plans.

Think about someone who is up for promotion even though others might see aspects of their job performance lackluster. “Why on earth would you even consider them?!” “I know things you don’t. I know what I have in mind and that this person is the one for the job. So back off and let me do my thing!”

This is the epitome of a “reset button”. The filthy clothes are a sinful man. God removes the filth and cleanses him. Whatever he’s done, it’s done. Whatever sin, it’s forgiven. What we have here is a clean slate to work from.

What a wonderful idea. That whatever our past, God can look at us in the present and see our potential. We can be forgiven and commissioned to something great. Even when an angel of the heavenly court speaks up, God can speak to our possibility, redeem us, and send us forward with a purpose.

What comes next is an “if/then” agreement. If Joshua is faithful he will have a great gift, privilege, and responsibility. We will be set over the worship of the Temple and given sway over the governing of God’s people. The “house” and the “courts”. This is how it was intended to be from the time of Saul.

The prophet/priest of God was to inform the King. He was to bring instruction and guidance. He was also to lead the people in faithfulness. It was a dual role. What led the people to exile was prophets and priests who didn’t do either. Their self interest and bending to the kings led the people and the nation away from God. Once again, a “reset button”. God is giving Joshua an opportunity to bring things back to correctness if he can fulfill his obligations and faithfulness.

As the vision winds done in this chapter, the symbolism is that of the return of a powerful leader. Governor? Monarch? The Branch is a leader who will restore the prosperity of God’s people. This is Messianic imagery.

We see Messiah as a spiritual redeemer. They saw Messiah as a redeemer of the place of God’s people in their present world. They would overcome oppressive powers. They would prosper. They would be “on top”. The image of the “stone” is that of a signet. A sign of royal authority.

As all of this comes together, God will restore God’s people “in a single day”. It will happen quickly.

Once again, we see hope. Hope for them and for us. Just because we made mistakes doesn’t mean we’re counted out. Joshua was still selected for God’s purposes despite whatever sin he may have had. In every life there is the chance to “reset”. Over and over again this is true.

Do we take God at God’s offer? Do we recognize our mistakes and take God’s offer of a “reset”? If we do, what do we do with it? Do we fall back into the same mess or do we move forward in faith and fruitfulness? The promises to Joshua here are made to Joshua. Yet over and over we have seen them played out in life after life.