

APRIL 19, 2026

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON "Four People" Matthew 22:39, Matthew 5:43-48

Following the celebrations of Palm Sunday and Easter we should be inspired and energized to live our faith with new intensity and intention. This isn't just remembering that we believe the events that found our faith occurred. It means renewed commitment to living out our faith in everyday life and striving to bring others to faith.

As we are reminded often Jesus boils the core of our faith down to loving God and loving one another. Indeed we show our love for God by HOW we love one another.

When we were in Mississippi we participated in a seminar that for me gave an exercise that we can use as a beginning step to measure how that unconditional, Jesus like love resides in our hearts. It was actually a seminar by Dr He Young Kimm on meditation but I think you'll quickly see how it applies to the love in our hearts. So I'd like you to join me in an exercise.

In your bulletins you'll find a paper with four spaces to write a name. Here is what I'd like you to write in each.

Me: Your own name

The heart: The name of the person you love and cherish most in the world

The flat face: Some identifying trait of a person who is as neutral in your life as can be. Most likely someone nameless to you but you can at least picture their face. It could be a cashier, server, someone you met in a waiting room, the person who walks their dog in front of your house sometimes, anyone.

The frown face: The person you despise the most in this world.

Next, I'll ask you to pray with the same hope, intensity, and desire for each of them for the following:

Their good health

Their genuine happiness

Dr. Kimm's point was the if we can't pray for these two simple things for anyone on the planet equally our meditation will suffer.

My suggestion is that if we can't pray for these two simple things for anyone on the planet equally we probably have work to do regarding the unconditional, Christ centered love in our hearts.

Loving ourselves- This is a clear point for Jesus. Love others as you love yourself. This is close to the Golden Rule, "do unto others as you'd have them do unto you". Part of loving God and loving others is loving ourselves.

Christians can have a hard time with this in an all or nothing world. Many traditions make us feel guilty for loving ourselves. It's called "arrogant" and "selfish". The idea that we are all utterly "worthless" and can "do nothing good" is a consistent message. All of this makes loving ourselves difficult.

How can we love others if we at least don't understand the basics in ourselves? You are desired by God. You are loved by God. You are forgiven through Christ. You have purpose and mission to do good in this world in Jesus' name. You are God's instrument as much as you will allow to be a vehicle for God's love in the world.

On the other hand sometimes we get swelled up as if we're better than others. We're not supposed to hang around certain crowds. We're not allowed to question because we have all the answers already. They say we're all "equal" but that's not how the actions pan out. So loving self does cross the line to pride and arrogance. I become such the center of my universe that I don't have room to love others they way God calls me to. I'm too wrapped up in me.

In the end it's that middle ground of realizing we have value and are worth loving because God loves us. Then we also let it humble us realizing that part of the point of being loved is to pass that love along.

So of course we pray for our own health and happiness!

It's hard to serve when we are burnt out from lacking in physical, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual health. Self-care isn't selfish when it's done correctly. It's loving ourselves SO THAT we can love others in all the fullness we are called to.

Happiness isn't to be shunned. Embrace it. Just don't make material happiness the center of life. Paul uses the term "content" in Philippians when he says he's learned to be content in all things. This means in having abundance or having nothing at all. This happiness, this content, allows him to walk in his faith with a hope and a lightness to bring to those around him.

We can have that too.

Loved one- This one is easy, even Jesus says so. He tells the people in Matthew that loving those who love us

back is no big deal. Even the most heathen of the heathen do that. To love those who love us and treat us well demonstrates little to nothing in the grand scheme of things. We'll get to the enemy loving in a moment. Loving those who love us isn't nothing in terms of relationships. Of course we do and of course it's beautiful, necessary, and wonderful. But there IS more.

A quick sideline here. This sense reminds me of something that even many Christians have adopted. "I'll treat you the way you treat me."

This is the opposite of the golden rule and denies the words of Christ regarding love of enemy. In fact it gives other people complete control over my actions and words. I give myself permission to be cruel and hateful if someone is that way to me. I'm allowed to stoop as low as the person I'm interacting with.

It's critical to remember that how I treat you says far more about me than it does about you. Finding the Christ inside us and choosing love and grace no matter what speaks loud volumes to the fickle and harsh world around us.

But to our loved one. Of course we pray for their health and happiness!

The nameless- This is the love of Jesus that spreads across the world. It's the love that healed the sick woman who touched His robe even when He had no idea who touched Him. He didn't know who, He just knew His desire was to heal and so He did. He didn't know the face and name of every one of the 5,000 He fed. He simply met the need because the need existed.

The Good Samaritan is the poster story for this. As the story goes a Jewish man was beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. Two respected, even religious Jews passed him by making excuses for why they didn't have to help this person. Their own sense of purity and taking care of their business took priority over the life of the man dying on the road.

Then comes the Samaritan. The enemy of the Jew. He didn't know the man either and had more reason than any to pass him by. Yet he didn't. He helped him and restored the man to health at his own expense.

He didn't need to know him. He didn't need to know his name. He didn't need to be like him and the bitterness between their people faded away. All he knew was this was a person. A person who was in need and that's all that mattered. So he showed love.

Are we in that same space? Here's a little test I have for myself.

When I'm slighted, inconvenienced, or even outright caused a problem by someone different than me, do I say in my heart "what else would I expect from 'those' people?" Even if something good happens does my heart ever say "wow, wouldn't have expected that from 'those' people."

If either is even somewhat present I have work to do. It shows I have made wide assumptions about a whole group of people. I put those assumptions on someone who is nothing more than a face and a voice for a few moments in time. I'm not considering them on their own merits as a human being that God loves just as much as God loves me.

In fact, I should pray for their health and happiness because if they are struggling and in need, part of a bad incident could be brought on by the stress they are under. And the good I should be grateful for anyone who shows a kindness and naturally wish them well.

Should I pray health and happiness for the nameless and faceless? Of course! Should I do my best to make choices that show a love that says I'm willing to do what part I can so that all can be happy and healthy? Certainly. Seems that Jesus was concerned about both for the nameless and faceless around Him.

The enemy- This is the hard one. It goes against human nature. It also goes against the push of a divided and angry world. Yet Jesus is the model for what He calls us to do. He can't be clearer.

Of course the "go to" is on the cross saying "forgive them for they don't know what they are doing". This wasn't a specific to a few forgiveness. It sounded more wide and full. A love so great that forgiveness was offered to all who put Him on that cross whether through direct action or, as many Christians believe, by necessity for grace to cover their sins.

In truth, Jesus has already backed Himself into this corner. Early on in His ministry when the disciples ask about forgiveness He tells them that as many times as someone wrongs them they are to forgive. No conditions. No demand for an apology. No ask for a change in behavior or attitude on the offender's part. Just forgiveness. Jesus exemplifies this on the cross.

And guess who this would have included? Judas.

The love of Jesus for His enemies invited Judas to the table with the rest of the disciples. Even as he was in the process of betraying Him. The same cup and bread offered to the rest was offered to Judas.

This is love of enemy if ever there was.

Why is this so important? Why does Jesus ask us to step so far out of our comfort to love and pray for our enemies? Literally for those who use and mistreat us?

Here's a few thoughts.

If I give myself permission to hate my enemy that's a fast road to putting them beneath me. To making them less than human. To erasing in my heart the value and worth in them that God continues to see. When I do that it's not a long road for me to excuse my own bad behavior towards them and break away from the call and path of Christ.

If I allow myself to hate them it's easy to put all the blame on the other person for the problems. That means I give myself a pass on asking the question "what might my role be in this?" If I too have sinned, I blind myself to my sin and then also to the ability to change and even ask for my own forgiveness.

As children we learn this but sometimes forget it as adults. When one kid comes and says "Johnny punched me!" Pretty quickly we are out to assess what all happened. Naturally the first story is that it came out of nowhere and the punched one did nothing wrong. Sometimes this might be true. Most it isn't.

"Well, Billy, you neglected to tell me that you looked at Johnny and made a 'yo mama' joke first..."

When I worked with kids in the institutional setting we dealt with this all the time. The goal in working with two kids in an altercation was to get both of them to figure out how to handle the situation better in the future. It wasn't about just consequence it was about effecting change.

And sometimes there were situations where a kid on the receiving end was just bad place bad time. Maybe the best they could figure out is "next time I see Johnny cursing and threatening I should walk away instead of sticking around."

Perfectly acceptable. But if all he can focus on is hating Johnny he is going to be blind to a better solution for tomorrow.

Same with us.

Why do we pray for their health and happiness? We've already touched on it. How much conflict is the result of our or someone else's poor physical, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual health? How much is because happiness and content doesn't reside in the heart?

Praying for their peace is also praying for peace for everyone and every situation around them. Praying for the same for myself is asking the same for me and everyone around me.

Because let's face it, sometimes we're our own worst enemy.

Pray health and happiness for our enemies? Check!

Preparing this I've had a lot of thoughts and I honestly can't say which of the following is more significant or present. Maybe they are equal because one feeds the other and vice versa.

All of us have parts of our hearts that need cleaning out. All of us have parts of our hearts that are wonderfully and fully given over to Christ.

The ones given over to Jesus and following Him are those parts that are at genuine peace. They are the parts that give us uncommon patience and grace for ourselves and others. They give us peace in the middle of chaos. They help us go be the image of Jesus in the room when everything else is falling apart. They are the best parts of ourselves.

The more we see and handle those pieces we haven't surrendered the more room we make for this incredible experience of God within us.

As we do this the hope is that others will see that and experience the love of God through us. The hope is that the world around us changes as our example inspires others to examine their own hearts and find more room for that same love.

We are made better and fuller. So is the world. And they feed off of each other.

The love of God is so incredibly remembered, embraced, and celebrated in Easter. That worship and time of year is fresh. Seize it and take advantage of it. Use it to grow deeper and more fully in love with God.

And when we're wondering how we're doing. Ask these questions.

How well do I love myself. My loved ones. The nameless and faceless of the world. And my enemy.

BIBLE STUDY 1 Timothy

1 Timothy is one of what is called the “pastoral” letters. It is intended to give instruction for leading a congregation/church. Timothy is well known to be one of Paul’s closest students and in this letter is even referred to as a “true son”. There is no question that Paul trusted Timothy and found him to be like family.

Something about these letters is interesting. While some take it at face value and simply claim that Paul himself wrote it, many if not most other scholars disagree. They place this in what they call the “disputed” letters of Paul. In other words, they think that someone other than Paul wrote it.

Several factors go into this conclusion.

There is wording, phrasing, and vocabulary choice that doesn’t fit with the other confirmed letters of Paul. It is kind of like when you know someone well and suddenly get a message, text, email, etc. from them and you know something is wrong. You let your friend know that their account may have been hijacked. Many times you’re right. What tips you off is that the message received while posing as your friend had enough differences from their normal communications that you know something is off.

There are offices and roles listed in the church for which qualifications are given. This is another tell. These positions couldn’t be in effect until the church had time to form in a much more structured fashion. It’s likely these offices couldn’t become a constant staple in church leadership until after Paul had already died.

There are also places where the messaging doesn’t agree with the messaging in Paul’s other letters. We’ll get to that as we unpack the book.

All of this to say that someone else may have written the letter. And that’s okay.

For us in our culture it seems wrong and dishonest. For many in that time it wasn’t uncommon. People would write in the name and person of a teacher to whom they were disciplined. Those receiving the letter weren’t offended by it. They took it for what it was worth and likely recognized in many cases the author was doing their best to represent the genuine views of the teacher.

As the letter begins, we see the reason for encouraging Timothy to hang in there in Ephesus. He is to root out and correct false teaching. We don’t know specifically what all was going on. What doctrines, myths, genealogies and the like are being referenced. We do know that they were disruptive to the church. These issues were distracting them from focusing on the genuine gospel message and doing their job. Loving people and bringing them to faith.

This isn’t a problem that’s left in the past. We see it still today.

There are beliefs, dogmas, and traditions in Christianity that aren’t Biblical. They are twists on scriptures. They are guesses to try and make sense of confusing scriptures. They are statements to affirm the authority of scripture. They are desired and admirable traits attributed to God. But they aren’t necessarily correct. And they can be distracting.

One example is “end times” theology. There are many different takes on the end times. The most popular is the one that insists the end is nigh and using frightening imagery and threats of damnation to keep people enthralled. Sadly much of what is taught doesn’t line up with scripture. Moreso, it does what this letter refers to. It distracts people from the fundamental point and purpose of the gospel.

This teaching often gets people afraid and contracting. Rather than spend time around the “sinners” they pull into their Christian cliques. There is fear that stepping outside of that will tempt them and cause a mistake that is damning. Especially of the end happens while making the mistake. The result? Insulating the community of faith which neglects that necessary call to spread the love and message of Jesus to those who don’t yet believe.

End times theology is also heavy handed on judgment. This often spills onto the believer whose approach to the world takes on a judgmental tone. These are the “morality police” who hammer nonbelievers by pointing out their mistakes or life choices that the believer doesn’t agree with. It pushes people to miss the whole “judge not lest ye be judged” sentiment of Christ and pushes people away rather than drawing them to Jesus.

Timothy is charged to get their focus in the right place so that they can do the work they are intended to do.

He is encouraged about using the law properly. As with many letters there is a kind of “vice list” here. Rather than diving into each issue mentioned, I’ll take it a bit more broadly. Some of these sensibilities are very culturally bound. They mean something different than what we talk about today using similar language. The point is at the end of the day knowing where we stand in terms of living lives that support or violate the law of love. That’s the whole Jesus thing. All the law can be summed up in loving God and loving neighbor.

The use of the law is simple. To help us draw closer to God by living lives tailored to love. These are examples of how that is compromised.

Punctuating this necessity to carry out the message of the gospels is Paul’s personal testimony. He recounts his attitude and aggressive persecution of Christians. He gives unflinching praise to God for the mercy revealed in Christ. If Jesus can extend mercy to Paul mercy can be extended to any and everyone. No one is excluded. Therefore all the more reason to keep the main thing the main thing.

Don't get distracted by foolish arguments and nonsense. All they do is prevent us from reaching people who are in the greatest need of the love of Christ.

We see Timothy encouraged. He is reminded of some prophecies made over him. Let's face it, all of us need reminders, especially when life is hard and we're facing challenges. What once felt like a clear and present purpose might be in doubt. Timothy is given a reminder that people of faith saw something revealed in him of great promise. Through the Spirit they affirmed this and continue to affirm it in his current call.

Perhaps this was needed to hear in light of these two characters that were to be expelled. What was their main misgiving that had "shipwrecked" their faith? They believed the resurrection was done and over with. In other words the promise of eternal life for believers was off the board if resurrection was concluded. This message is a critical problem for the church, particularly at that time when persecution was very real. As with some other circumstances in the other letters, the answer if there was no repentance was to turn them out.

The question that rightly came up was "if they are so worried about salvation why would they turn them over to Satan?" This seems at odds.

The answer is simple. Satan doesn't always refer to the devil perse. In Job Satan has hasatan, or "the sathan". This was an accusing angel in God's heavenly court. In Job this angel brought reports about earth's activities to God. In one encounter the angel challenged Job's faithfulness because God had done nothing but bless and protect him.

Short version, God gives the angel, the accuser, permission to test Job through a series of tragedies. Note here, God is not the one doing the testing. It is this angel. The angel is proving out Job's faith.

This is the equivalent here in Timothy. They are turned out so that the angel, the accuser/tester, can work on them to bring about repentance and a correct belief and spirit. The point isn't damnation. It is salvation. Consider the following. Parents encounter this all the time. They try and try to teach and support a child who refuses to listen. The child takes advantage of the support while ignoring the wisdom. The child refuses to change. Ultimately the parent says "I'm going to let you go. Keep doing your thing. Keep making the same choices and let life teach you what happens. When you have to pull yourself out of the consequences, maybe then you'll learn."

This is similar to that.

1 Timothy opens with warnings that are as important today as ever they were. Twisted scripture and false teachings abound that manipulate and misguide well meaning believers. The result speaks for itself in a fractured Christianity that is ripe with abuses, fraudulent circumstances, and teaching that ignores the core teaching of loving our neighbor.

It is our job to both be discerning enough to not believe the lies and to make sure we aren't promoting them ourselves.

We all need to let love be our guide. We need to remember that avoiding the "sinner" is to avoid people like Paul before his conversion. How many Pauls have been ignored and cast aside?

We all should be reminded and encouraged by our calling. God's stake in us is powerful and profound. Sometimes things are hard, maybe even hopeless. Stay the course and keep showing up. Keep putting in the effort. It matters.