October 18, 2026 *Marion* Weekly Update

Sermon "Hogwarts and Faith" 1 Samuel 28:8-17, Acts 8:14-23

What is your favorite Halloween memory?

Heading towards Halloween, there will inevitably emerge somewhere the argument about whether or not Christians should participate in it. I would like to offer a few things and then look at some scriptural stories around witchcraft and sorcery.

First there is the history. All Saint's Day is a centuries old Christian tradition honoring faithful men and women who have passed away before the rest of us. There are also other more pagan and occult traditions that had their own senses of the same time of year. In the late 1800s/early 1900s there were European ideas of the celebration that turned violent and destructive. The night became excuse for kids and others to wreak different kinds of havoc in their communities. Community institutions stepped in and tried to ease that more malicious sense into a communal celebration that was wholesome. They organized masquerade parties, festivals, and were part of getting trick or treating as a practice. They turned what was destructive into something community based and fun. The church was one of those institutions. It had a role in creating what we see today.

In other words the practice some Christians condemn today was actually instituted by the church a hundred years ago. Not as a compromise but as a way to exert a Christ centered spirit of community in response to disunity and destruction.

In terms of faithfulness and how we approach others we have to acknowledge a couple things. Our sense of the occult practices is largely colored by our own sense of faith and worship. Ours is fine and the others are not. Yet talk to someone who is indoctrinated by neither. Much of it looks and sounds the same to them.

In scripture fortune telling, being a medium connecting the physical world to the spiritual, and spell casting were forbidden. YET.

Prophets were called seers and oracles, just like their pagan counterparts. They were asked to tell the future and be a medium between this world and God.

When we have traditions that preach that if you use the right scripture and right language you can force God to grant whatever request, that sense of bending the universe to your will through the spoken word has another name in more occult practices. They are called spells.

We have language that we don't even question but to an outsider sounds very off putting. We "eat the flesh of Jesus" and "drink the blood of Christ". We are "bathed in the blood" to "wash away our sins". Forgiveness required a literal human, blood sacrifice.

If we heard these things from any other tradition we would condemn them.

We do not because we've been incorporated into the language and meaning. We don't see the similarity in in our language and ritual because we're taught that we are right and everyone else is wrong. Yet to an outsider it looks very similar.

The reason we are okay with our version is because we trust that the object of our faith, our asking, and our salvation is correct. That God is singular and we know Him.

I'm not trying to equate Christianity with every other practice. Don't mistake me. What I'm more calling on is recognizing that when we engage folks from other beliefs attacking their rituals and such isn't really working because they can turn the tables easily. Attacks are a bad way to begin anyway. Instead we have the witness of our life experiences of faith and relationship with God to lean on as they reflect our grasp of scripture.

In order to see someone else for who they are we have to also be willing to see ourselves through their eyes so we can honestly come together in conversation and exchange.

Now to our passages. In a world where some people are bred to be so terrified of "demons" and "spirits" and Halloween represents this to them how do we live into faith in a way that is honest and tackles things head on?

Look at several situations that involve witchcraft and sorcery and consider what the issue is that gets addressed or handled.

Saul and the witch of Endor: This is an example of a medium. Saul had outlawed such practices, though not the practices of the Israelite seer/oracle/prophet. He'd become desperate because he hadn't heard from God. So he went to the very source he'd threatened with death.

She was terrified until he reassured her. At Saul's request she conjured the spirit of Samuel. Samuel wasn't happy. He scolded Saul and told him that he was getting just what God said he would. He made his bed and now he needed to lie in it.

Samuel didn't lambaste the witch. He lambasted Saul. Why? Because the biggest issue was Saul's disobedience. Going to the medium was just one more instance of it. Over and over again Saul chose to disobey God. That's what brought God's silence and deafness to Saul. Saul hadn't changed his heart or his ways. Saul was desperate and continued on the path he'd already charted.

One of the great ironies in our present day is that there are desperate people who come to church looking for Christ and are pushed away. Saul was desperate and looked apart from God. Today there are churches that proclaim God and Christ and have created an environment that actually repels the desperate who are seeking God.

Then we have Simon the sorcerer. Apparently he'd actually become a believer, but as he saw Phillip and the other apostles doing their thing got tempted. When he saw them imparting the Holy Spirit to others, he wanted a piece of that action.

Foolishly Simon went to Peter and asked if he could purchase the ability to impart the Holy Spirit. He was quickly scolded and told to repent of his wicked heart.

My sense of this is that Simon's notion that making the supernatural a business proposition hadn't left him. Before it was something we'd call more occult. Here it was the gift of the Holy Spirit. That worldly sensibility was at his core whether coming to faith or not.

Note, however, that they didn't come at him for sorcery. They came at him for greed and selfish ambition.

Then there's the story of the girl who had a spirit about her that allowed her to tell fortunes. In Acts 16 he is following Paul around and shouting that he and his partners were servants of the most high God. Paul turns in irritation and casts the spirit out of her. Her master was making

good money off of her fortune telling. So that caused Paul some issue because the master came after him for lost income.

For our senses this morning something is noteworthy. Paul responded out of irritation. He hadn't gone looking for her because she was a fortune teller. He acted because she was an obnoxious distraction. She was detracting from his purpose and mission.

If you want to find an equivalent think about this. Have you ever had a passion for something and had someone come alongside in a way that was actually hurtful to your cause. They had some similar words and messaging but the way they went about it did more harm than good? Maybe even went against the very message you were trying to put out?

Paul's issue wasn't the fortune telling in this moment. It was the bigger issue of what she was doing to hamper his ministry.

Here is what I want us to recognize this morning. Yes, scripture speaks against fortune telling, sorcery and witchcraft. But in these instances, there were bigger issues at hand. Getting wrapped up in fringe practices misses a much bigger point that is across the board. It affects not only non-Christians but also many professing Christians as well.

With Saul it was disobedience. With Simon it was greed and wrong motive. With the fortune teller it was spectacle that took away from the genuine mission. All of this is at hand in our own lives, and the lives of every person of faith. Even if it's not in practice the temptation certainly exists.

What is the bigger issue? I find it a struggle when I hear Christians rail against showing love to kids who are just embracing a sense of fun and playfulness with candy. Particularly in a world where there is so much actual hardship, harshness, and even evil. And Christians around the world fall prey to it themselves.

If we want to see Christ live and thrive, there are bigger fish to fry than books, stories, and characters that everyone, including children, know aren't real.

Be the real obedience. Countering the "forces of darkness" is as simple is obeying Christ's instruction to love one another. To be kind. To show compassion and help the least of these. Most importantly to do that without making excuses to ignore that instruction. Or to give others a pass to ignore it. Saul's disobedience is a teachable moment for you and I that following Christ's genuine example is far more powerful than condemning a wild goose chase.

Have right motive. It's easy to give a pass to our own or someone else's wrong motives if it benefits us. Simon the sorcerer I'm sure had this conundrum. "I just want to give the Holy Spirit". The apostles saw through it and denied him.

Knowing our own motives is so important. We might not end up on the side of ease and convenience. But we will end up on the side of Christ. Spotting those same motives in others prevents us from co-signing on messaging that might sound good in terms of comfort but isn't on point with Jesus.

It's quality control on what teachers we listen to, who we question, and who we run from. All of this is integral to both our personal faith and our public witness.

Know the difference between spectacle, marketing, and smoke and mirrors versus actual faith and Christ centered mission and living. One serves us, the other calls us to serve others. One has ministry done for us, the other calls us to do ministry ourselves. One is about the shiny

thing to look at being more word than deed, the other is more about genuine deed that puts the evidence to our word.
These are the things that bring light to darkness. They demonstrate faith that is real rather than just lip service and show.
Evil isn't pushed back by flowery speech that doesn't have the chops to back it up. It's pushed back by genuineness of light and life.
Obedience to Christ. Proper motive. Authentic over show and distraction. This is the meaty grit of faith that changes the world. It changes lives. It sets an inspiring example.
In a world that's had way to much fake we are called to be the real deal. When we are people notice. The effect might not be in the timing we want. It might be a slow burn. We may never see the final product. Regardless our purpose is to be that unwavering example and reflection of Christ.
That's my message to all of us, self included. Dig deep and dig in. That's what changes the face of the world.
Don Quixote is famous for attacking windmills futile because he though they were enemies. Halloween is a windmill that's honestly one more opportunity to show love and grace.
Dig in on those things that even the early apostles saw as more important than practices that were a distraction rather than a threat. Follow Jesus. Right motive. Authenticity over distraction. This is the light that dispels darkness. The good that overcomes evil. That antidote to all the wrong because it is rooted in a divine right.

BIBLE STUDY Titus 1
This go round with Titus we'll be doing more "addendum" kind of writing. We have a full write up of our previous study on Titus in our Bible Study Library in the Gathering Area of the church. You are free to borrow that any time you like and are encouraged to do so. It has more "nuts and bolts" things. This write up will focus more on some items brought out in our discussions.
The first piece is a reference to "God our Savior." This certainly indicates a growing idea of God and Jesus being one. The actual doctrine of the Trinity wouldn't be decided on for hundreds of years. That said, we see language here that makes it apparent why the church wrestled with the question of how these three divine pieces came together with one another. Particularly since it originates in a faith that was monotheistic.
God and Savior are one.
If we are honest, the whole sense of the Trinity is mysterious. Every attempt at simplifying it falls drastically short. Even faithful Christian academics disagree on how the language of Jesus and the rest of the New Testament sort out with Trinitarian claims. All this to say that while we don't often see this doctrine as an act of faith but rather fact, the reality is that it takes great faith to overcome the mystery and simply trust that three in one works.
And that mystery is perfectly acceptable. It's honest. And we'll see shortly that mystery or wonder isn't disqualifying because faith manifests itself in other more practical, tangible, and revealing ways.
The notion that God IS Savior actually pulls back some questionable notions about God's goodness. We us the language of "son of God" for Jesus. For those who have been victims of

parental abuse, this can be difficult. How do we justify a "father" subjecting his "son" to torture and death simply to save a bunch of strangers? Most of us parents wouldn't even imagine doing that.

So many terrible images have been conjured up through the years around this challenging parents to question if they would offer up their child to death for the good of others. This is a pretty cruel exercise, and it fails to recognize this simple sentence in Titus that "God IS Savior." If Jesus IS God and God IS Jesus then there is only one conclusion. It's mathematical. If a=b and b=c then a=c.

In this equation God isn't offering up a "son" or "offspring". God is offering Godself in sacrifice for all of God's children. This changes the landscape dramatically. Now the question is this. "As a parent, would you sacrifice your life for the benefit and good of your children?" That isn't child abuse of sacrifice. It is self (or selfless) sacrifice to save untold children.

What follows is a list of requirements, or behaviors, for leadership in the church. Titus is over all of Crete and appointing elders. To borrow Methodist terminology we might say Titus was the district superintendent appoint pastors with Paul as his bishop.

Here is the takeaway. Even if we are embracing mystery with certain doctrines of the church like the Trinity, there is something that reveals our faith. It's what we do and who we are. Someone might not fully grasp the Trinity. But they believe in God. They trust that somehow salvation hinges on Jesus. They feel the Spirit within. And they know that their purpose is to live into the example of Christ. So they do. Works matter.

For Titus, in order to have sway in a leadership role, a life needs to be in orderly. None will ever be perfect. Roman and Greek societal standards look different than present societal standards in America. At the end of the day, do we represent Jesus genuinely? Do we let our lives be guided by His love, His example, and His mercy? If a life of faith has order and discipline, it will be very difficult to convince others that faith is worthwhile if our own lives are chaotic, disordered, and fall outside of His model of love.

There were obviously challenges to Titus's ministry. Thos of the "circumcision" are mentioned. Jewish Christians imposing Jewish expectations on Gentile converts is a constant theme in Paul's ministry. Evidently on Crete Titus was battling this as well. Encouragement is given to not feed into whatever distractions where being offered.

Something that was dialed in on was a profound statement. "To the pure all things are pure, to the corrupt all things are corrupt." This is so incredibly true and evident in what we see in the world around us today.

It doesn't mean that evil is good and good can be evil. This throws any moral compass entirely away.

Instead we have a lesson. If someone is pure of mind and heart, even the worst situation can be used to bring about some measure of good. It's about perspective. The pure is always striving to act purely. So even amidst trouble and temptation the goal is to find the good.

On the other hand to the corrupt all things are corrupt. A corrupt mind can take even the best things and find ways to use them for selfish or bad purposes. They are opportunistic. Or they are just negative. Nothing is ever good enough. They see the bad in everything.

Here the question is which are we? Do we look for the good in everything? Do we seek to make the best of every situation? Are we solution focused?
OR
Do we only see the negative? Are we constantly critical? Do we give in to doom and gloom? Are we more focused on the problem?
The answer to most of our issues in our world and lives hinges on this and it is central to our faith. Where is our energy and perspective? Do we believe the Christ who says we can or the world who says we can't/won't?