November 1, 2026 *Marion* Weekly Update

Sermon "Sanctuary" Deuteronomy 19:4-10, John 8:2-10

Are you familiar with the story of the Hunchback of Notre Dame? My favorite expression of the story, unsurprisingly, is the animated Disney movie by that name. Throughout the movie the notion of "sanctuary" is very rich. If you're not familiar:

The story centers around Quasimodo who has some physical issues. He essentially imprisoned inside the Cathedral of Notre Dame and famously rings the massive bells in the tower.

The one who put him there is Frolo. Frolo is a judge in charge of the law enforcement in Paris. He is self-righteous and holier than thou. His goal is to rid Paris of all sin and wickedness. Of particular note to Frolo is the gypsies. He sees them as one of the key reasons for the problems in Paris and is rooting them out. Not because they are worse, essentially because they are different.

At the beginning Frolo is arresting some gypsies when one woman runs. He chases her to the steps of the Notre Dame cathedral where she bangs on the door screaming for "sanctuary!!" She has a bundle in her arms that Frolo violently grabs, pulling her off balance. She falls, hits her head, and dies. When the bundle is opened it is discovered that she was holding a baby. This baby has physical issues that horrify Frolo. He sees anything outside of his own sense of "typical" or "normal" as evil and deserving of destruction. Spotting a well he is preparing to drop the child down the well as the priest opens the door.

He sees Frolo, the woman, and the child. He knows what's happened. As penance the priest tells Frolo that to save his soul from damnation he must raise the child as his own. Frolo splits the difference and orders the child, Quasimodo, to be raised in the confines of the church. He would provide food and clothing. He even visited the child, though we learn that those visits were educating the growing boy that he was substandard. He was vile and evil.

Here is the interesting thing about sanctuary here. And we see it unfold through the story as a gypsy woman, Esmerelda dares to challenge Frolo for his unjust arrests and sentencings of her people. He chases her, too, to the cathedral where she makes it inside to claim sanctuary. When he confronts her we find Frolo to be filled with lust towards her along with his judgment and hard heart. She escapes.

Later he is able to arrest her and gives her the choice to belong to hi or be excecuted. She chooses execution. As she's being burned at the stake Quasimodo dramatically rescues her and brings her to a balcony on the church, lifting her hight and screaming "sanctuary!!!!!"

There is a real irony in they notions of safe haven as they appear.

The sincere sanctuary was a practice to be shielded from unjust or unfair punishment. It was to help innocents on the bad end of a vendetta or even the guilty from bloodlust until things calmed down. This was the woman who ran and Esmerelda.

Then you have the self-righteous and powerful Frolo who perverts the idea. He paints himself as a gracious man caring for Quasimodo. He tells Quasimodo that his sentence to stay in the church is actually a loving gift. The world is an ugly place and Frolo is giving him sanctuary

from it as a protective father figure. The truth is that Frolo is using the church for his own kind of safe haven. He is hiding the evidence of his own sin and evil heart from the world so he can maintain his image and control.

In other words the true sanctuary was to protect the innocent and hardpressed from unjust retribution. Frolow made sanctuary a procector of the guilty so he could avoid just consequence.

This idea of sanctuary, or safe haven existed in the church for some time. Through the middle ages that changed, likely and largely because there were people who abused the privilege to, like Frolo, escape justice. That said, we see in scripture that this isn't a new or foreign idea.

In Deuteronomy we see cities of refuge. These places were sanctuaries for people who might have been involved in a situation where someone died unintentionally or by accident. Families and friends in a fit of rage might pursue blood justice and seek to execute them without fair trial or presenting fair evidence. Once someone was dead it was hard to plead their own case.

They could run to one of these cities and be protected and spared. If it was found that they had actually committed murder all bets were off and they were offered to the authorities.

Otherwise they were protected so long as they stayed in the city limits until the present High Priest passed away. They were safe and given grace and the time for things to cool down.

Ultimately if a trial was had the intention was that it would be fair and just.

In John sanctuary isn't a place. It is a person. That person is Jesus. In the story people speculate a lot but the truth is there's things we don't know. We don't know what He wrote in the sand. We don't know how they came upon her "in the act". We just know that there was something fishy about the whole circumstance. They came seeking death for a woman who was caught in a mistake. In the midst of sin.

Jesus humbles every person ready to stone her to death (this gives weight to the Deuteronomy idea of summary execution without a trial). He calls to question their own hearts and deeds.

Who is really qualified to render this judgment and execution in that moment?

This woman is spared. She has found safety in Christ. Sanctuary. He leaves her with instruction to not waste the gift. "Go and sin no more". Still, even in this situation of an indisputable mistake and to them a crime, she is delivered from death and punishment because of the sanctuary she found in Jesus.

This idea of sanctuary in many ways gotten lost in the world and even the church.

The term "safe space" has gotten politically and culturally loaded. Many bristle at it because the idea of safe space is come to be associated with weakness or being overly sensitive.

That said, we all want them. We have other names for them that we just don't call "safe space".

Attorney client privilege is a safe place to be vulnerable in sensitive matters that are part of legal proceedings without fear that they will be broadcast. Doctor patient confidentiality(HIPPA) protects us from our trusted medical practitioners spreading our sensitive health information outside of our relationship without our permission. The legalities and ethics of a psychiatrist, psychologist, therapist, even we pastors is to provide a sanctuary where the deepest most vulnerable things can be shared without fear of retribution.

We all value and want these relationships.

All of us have friends, family, etc. that we care for but also have aspects of life we would never share with them. Why? Because they have proven that they can't be trusted to keep confidence, to withhold judgment, to not mock us, to not use it against us down the road. We have a term for those folks, even those we care for.

"They aren't safe to talk to about that."

When that safety is violated in any of these places it does incredible, sometimes irreparable damage to our ability to trust.

That is sad and incredibly harmful. The only way to work our way through so many vital things in our lives healthily is to be able to be straight and honest. To be vulnerable in the presence of someone who's only desire is to help us move into a better, more correct, healthier way of living and being.

In matters of faith, how can we hope to grow if we can't be honest about our struggles? How can we find people to pray with us, for us, and hold us accountable through guidance and encouragement if we don't feel safe to share those struggles and questions?

Today there are those who, like Frolo, use faith as a smokescreen. It's plain to see the wicked being done yet they have the religious speak. They go to church. They quote scripture. For those who see clearly religion and faith become untrustworthy because it's not about growth and relationship with God in those instances. It's about covering up sinful spirit and action with a religious window dressing. Jesus called these people "white washed tombs". Pretty outside and dead inside.

More hurtful though is when the church becomes a rumor mill. The old expression "it's not gossip if it's a prayer request" comes to mind. Pastors judging harshly from the pulpit and drawing battle lines of who is "in" and who is "out". People shaming one another either face to face, online, or behind one another's backs.

Not every time, but many, there is a reason a prayer request is spoken as "unspoken". The situation is too sensitive and the trust isn't there that people will handle it with love and grace. How sad is that? Prayer is so deeply needed yet the one place that should be safe to share the concern isn't.

How many of us would be truly comfortable sharing our deepest darkest struggles openly in worship? How many of us are comfortable to lay our sins and souls bare in the very place we call sanctuary?

Sometimes this place we call sanctuary is seen is holy and reverent to the exclusion of the grit and grime of the actual world. There should be a reverence to the space. Absolutely. But that reverence doesn't mean fear to let the honesty of our lives and the world might "contaminate it". The opposite is true. Like the woman caught in adultery this is where we come alongside that same Jesus. Where we want to walk away better than we came in. We can't lay something at His feet if we keep it stashed in the car because we don't want anyone to see it.

I want this place to be where someone can walk in here looking like they just came from the club, because they may have. Can have whiskey on the breath. Can have not been able to shower for the last week and wearing the same clothes for that same week. Can have just been caught embezzling. Can have just come to terms with cheating on their spouse or being cheated on. Have just had a knock down drag out argument on the way into the parking lot.

Any and all of this, and know that they walk in here welcome. Free from condemnation and into open arms that want to receive, love, and be Jesus for whomever it is.
Don't mistake me, part of a safe haven requires it to be safe. We can do that AND welcome all of the ugly the world has to offer. Sanctuary from the law no longer exists. But we can give people a true and needed sanctuary from the ugliness of the rest of the world and the judgment that so many people face day in and day out from believers and non-believers alike.
Here is one of the great secrets that's really no secret at all. If we want to have it we have to be it.
If I want sanctuary and save haven I have to be willing to be that for whomever I come across. I can't be judgmental and set that example, then expect the safety of a sanctuary. What I participate in I create. So do we all.
Part of the beauty of doing this is that it releases us from so much burden. That's why the burden of Jesus is light. We let go of all the judgment and "should bes". We meet people where they are at and walk together towards faith in God.
Here's what I can promise you. On my part you have a safe haven around and in me. In conversation, practice, whatever, I'll be a safe person for whatever you might need to get off your chest or work through. I've found it's so much easier to love someone in their struggle and pain than push them away, make it worse, or condemn.
This story in John 8 in most modern and reliable translations includes a note. This story was likely added after the gospel had been written and in circulation for a time. This doesn't discredit it. It asks the question "what is so important about the story that it was felt necessary to insert it?"
Maybe this is it. Today, tomorrow, down the road all of us might have that person come into our life that everyone else around has written off and condemned. And we get to be that sanctuary of Christ for them. We grant them a place of safety and grace that may just change their life. And sometimes we might be the woman. If you have been, I encourage you to remember the person who was Jesus to you in that moment. Ask a special blessing on them for their courage and love.
If all of us can do this then perhaps sanctuary once again will become more than a place where we do the "holy" things that we do in worship. It will become the warmest and truest of safe havens to anyone who is fortunate to come in, including us.

BIBLE STUDY Titus 3
This final chapter of Titus is small but full. The last verses are typical of letters in the New Testament. There are notes and such passed along to people associated with the writer. The short chapter is a repeater for the letter as a whole and a great calling to any Christian.
It was noted that this final chapter is so tight and reflective of the letter that it might have been sufficient to be the entire letter.
There are the attributes to strive for and to avoid. There is also a very succinct statement of faith that drives those attributes as well. We are redeemed by God/Jesus. That is accomplished through and because of God's mercy. That redemption adopts us into a secure relationship with God so that we inherit a wonderful gift, eternal life.

Repeatedly these pastoral letters also remind us that works are an essential part of the life of every Christian. We aren't redeemed to do nothing. We are redeemed to reflect the purposes and work of Christ, the One who redeems us. That means standing for those who are stepped on, Caring for those in need. Comforting the hurting and broken. Forgiving. As we saw in chapter 2 conducting ourselves with compassion, kindness, and faithfulness regardless of what others around us are doing and evening doing to us.

As we approach this election next week, Nove. 3, some of these statements were discussed around the table.

Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, 2 to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.

3 At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

These are the first verses of this chapter. 1 and 2 tell us how to be and 3 how we should not. As we look at one another, the campaigns, and the candidates what do we see/hear? Do we see more of verses 1 and 2 or verse 3? This is indicative of a lot of work we have to do as a nation. There is far too much of verse 3 in the public conversation. All over social media. In conversations from person to person. It's also important to remember that even those on the outside appearing as 1 and 2 can have 3 lurking in their heart. This is where we pay attention to our own private conversations with like minded people. How do I speak? What comes pouring out as the truth in my heart?

Many don't even wait for private to let the darkness spill out. It comes out broadcast for anyone to see and hear.

The same is true for the light. We see amazing examples of restraint, grace, compassion, and the ability to see beyond the emotion of the moment to what carries us through conflict to a more unified resolution and a brighter world together.

As frustrating as tense times and moments can be we remember that they are also ripe with opportunity. Chapter 1 referred to the Cretans as brutes and liars. Yes, it's instructive for Titus to know with whom he is working. It's also a reminder of opportunity. When we see the ugly and the dark it's a chance to show something different. An opportunity to exemplify the correct of Christ in the midst of the wrong of the world. We have that opportunity each and every day. Never forget that the darker the dark the brighter the light shines.