

Marion weekly update

SERMON Dec 17—"Good News for Who? #3" Luke 11:41-43, Proverbs 31:4-9

This week we essentially finish our Advent series. Next Sunday is the last in Advent, however it's also Christmas Eve! The service will be a wonderful celebration with carols and readings to prepare us for the holiday. So this morning is our last message in our series Good News for Who?

What we've seen is that the gospel is a beautiful story of life and ministry leading up to the pouring out of grace on the cross. While the free offer of salvation to all is indeed good news to everyone, the ministry of Jesus wasn't necessarily good news to everyone who heard it. We've seen that His message to give of our resources to help the poor and needy isn't good news to those who would rather ignore the poor and needy and cling to their wealth. Jesus' message to be humble and put others first isn't good news to those who would rather cling to their pride and "right" to elevate themselves above others.

At the same time it is great news to the poor and needy knowing God sees them and calls others to help them. It is great news to the humble who can rest easy knowing that sharing the spotlight, and putting others first is counted as righteousness to be rewarded in the Kingdom of God.

Today our final "bad news" is to the powerful.

As we've seen so many times, it's important to remember that power in and of itself isn't bad. It's how that power is used.

Over and over through the Old Testament we see this as an issue. The people repeatedly fell away from God. We know they did not because they necessarily abandoned all worship. We know this because of their actions. Behavior is the mark of our faithfulness. One of the chief problems was that those who had power were lording it over those who did not. They were taking advantage of people, oppressing them, and cheating them out of justice.

Jesus' messaging about how to handle power isn't good news to people who fit into this category.

In His own time there was abuse of power everywhere. The Romans used force to keep the empire in check. They very much did so with the Jews. There are more than a few incidents when a band of Jewish men had enough of being mistreated and staged a revolt. These revolts never ended well for the Jews.

This goes hand in glove with some of the problems with the priesthood. The Romans selected the High Priest. Part of the role of the religious leadership was to keep the people in check. They enjoyed status and authority. In Luke we see the criticism that they were so observant with the "rules" yet abandoned the more important part of their role. Do justice and love God. Indeed this portion of Luke's gospel is about the woes of the Pharisees. About their misuse of their power.

One can't get a clearer example of abuse of power than the trial of Christ. It was a railroad job from the get go. And true to their role keeping people in check for Rome the High Priest famously said "better that one should die for the many". Brought up on phony charges, crucifixion was the answer to silence this man who was pushing a movement that could potentially upend the order of things. Upend the order, upend the control.

This isn't over and done. Even in our own time we see power run amok. People in high places manipulating all sorts of things to line wallets, guide public opinion and attitude, and accomplish agendas that aren't necessarily in the best interest of the population but work out very well for some select powerful. Around the world we see the powerful oppressing the weak. We see genocide creep up at times, which is very much the powerful overwhelming the weak.

On a smaller scale I would wager that many here this morning have had the following experience.

You've been pushing for something, striving for something, trying to make a difference, and hit a wall. The wall is someone of greater power and influence standing in the way no matter how correct what you are shooting for may be. And you're squashed simply because you don't have the same amount of pull.

Jesus calls us to something different. He calls us to justice and correctness. He calls us to stand up for the ones being stepped on. He calls us to servanthood.

Proverbs has a very interesting take on things. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying when things get rough go out and get tanked. But there is a very real point here. The powerful are instructed to stay sober minded. Why? So that they don't fall into the trap of overindulging their power and oppressing those less powerful than they are. On the other hand, the oppressed are given a pass to find something to take the edge off of their misery. When the powerful abuse their authority, those on the receiving end are harmed. They suffer. And sadly there's not much they can do about it often times. Over and over again we are encouraged to seek justice. The famous verse "what does the Lord require of you? To seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." The gospel is wonderful news for the oppressed. The gospel calls on the powerful to treat others with kindness and mercy. Justice is a requirement if we are following scripture. True justice for everyone across the board. The justice that is real, not the "justice" money and influence can buy.

The King of Kings and Lord of Lords modeled what true power looks like properly wielded. He demonstrates it at the last supper when He washes the feet of the disciples. When they object He tells them that a true master must be servant of all. The more the power, the greater the calling to serve. It's never about indulging authority for the sake of self. It's using it to better the lives of everyone else. In the mid 2000s I did a year long training that began with a week in Arizona and ended with another week in Arizona. In between we had small groups that met through conference calls and other tech of the day to complete three or four modules through the year. The training was about servant leadership. At the time there were companies that were struggling. The poster child for this model was Southwest Airlines. Some of these companies flipped the model of leadership. Rather than "boss" style leadership they adopted a servant mentality. It wasn't about coercing employees to do what was desired. It was seen as now serving the employees to make sure they had what they needed in their roles. The thinking was that if the employee was served well, they in turn would serve the customer well. And it worked. Sidelining the old model of top down bossing in favor of seeing the role of a leader as a servant made all the difference in the world and Southwest came out of their slump and began to thrive again.

Power used wisely and graciously.

Jesus comes to call us to influence the world around us, as much as we can, to build up one another. Whatever power or authority we are given, we use to do exactly what God did on that first Christmas. We use it to help God break into the world all over again for the purpose of redeeming it and transforming it into God's Kingdom.

Don't mistake your position. Often we look at power under a specific lens and think we, the common ordinary, don't have it. We do. We all have power. We all have authority. We can influence someone's day, someone's mindset, someone's entire life each and every day by how we choose to interact.

So we choose wisely. Like Jesus we choose to embrace every moment with the heart of a servant. And in doing so we inject the same hope into the world that was birthed long ago in a humble manger. We inject the hope that all are loved, all are worthy, all are offered the same salvation. And all are offered the same opportunity to make this world what it was always intended to be. Good.

BIBLE STUDY

The final extraordinary woman in our study as we close it out heading into the holidays is Lydia. As we looked at her story, though very little is said of her in scripture, we see three primarily impressive things about her. The final one is what she is likely most widely remembered for, and is a wonderful thing to remember ourselves as we are in a season of gatherings and celebrations.

Lydia sets herself apart simply by her role. She seems to be regarded as the head of her household. In our day of independent women this might not seem strange. Back then, this wasn't the norm. Typically a man would lead the home. Equally impressive is that Lydia is painted as a successful business-woman dealing in "purple dyes." How this came about is all a matter of speculation.

Lydia was a Gentile from Asia that had moved to Greece. We know that her home was known for these purple dyes often used to represent royalty in their attire. This explains the lucrative nature of her business. How did she get there or get full control of the business? Did she move at her family's behest to take the family trade abroad and establish another location? Did she marry a man from Greece who brought her and used her connections to establish a business? We don't know!

How did she become the head of a household? First of all we need to remember that household doesn't mean the head of a nuclear family. It means literally the entire household which in her case may have included servants, slaves, employees, etc., as well as the possibility of children. She wasn't married at the point of her conversion. Was she ever? Did she have children? We don't know!

What we do know is that by the time Paul had come across her she was established successfully in Philippi. Whatever she had to overcome, a strong, independent woman in this world was impressive.

Her faith is also extraordinary. In order for a synagogue to be established in a city there needed to be a quorum of men. This didn't exist where she was. So the women, and we may be able to presume at least a couple men, met on the bank of the river. But Lydia was Gentile. This would have meant she was loosely part of a group called proselytes. These were Gentiles who found some kind of connection with and affinity for the Jewish tradition and faith. They attended synagogue alongside the Jews. In fact it was this very reality that helped Paul convert so many Gentiles. He began in the synagogues and when he'd get kicked out for his teaching would find refuge and a place to minister in the home of a Gentile.

Lydia fit this and we'll get to that momentarily. As to her faith, she had her entire household baptized. What this means for genuine faith is unknown. All we know is that Lydia had made a certain decision to follow Christ and as head of the household had her household honor that in baptism. I would like to think that they converted fully, and I would think that Paul wouldn't just baptize willy nilly. Still, their faith is never elaborated upon.

That Lydia the proselyte converted to Lydia the Christian is significant enough. What is more significant is what followed. Perhaps she'd heard of Paul's hardships and such, we don't know. What we do know is that after she'd offered Paul and company lodging they were ultimately arrested, beaten and jailed. A recent Christian convert it would have been easy to throw in the towel. "Whoa! I didn't know that could happen if I follow this thing through! I'm out!!!!" That wasn't her response through. From what we gather she stayed true to her faith even after seeing the ones who brought her to it arrested, beaten and jailed. This is a rare strength of faith.

Finally we come to what Lydia is remembered for most. Hospitality.

It was common to welcome strangers into the home for a night or so. This was culturally appropriate. It's why Jesus sent the disciples out two by two and told them to take nothing. They simply relied on the hospitality of those who were in whatever town they visited. If their message wasn't received, if they didn't receive hospitality they shook the dust from their sandals. "It will be better for them on the last day than Sodom and Gomorrah." According to Ezekiel what was the great sin of Sodom? Lack of hospitality and cruelty to the stranger.

Lydia went above and beyond. She enthusiastically took them into her home. How might this have looked to the neighbors? She didn't seem to care. She offered to put them up for as long as they needed. In fact it says she "persuaded them" to stay with her. Her heart's desire was to care for these men who had opened her eyes to the gospel. To put up one person indefinitely is costly and can be weighing. To offer this to a team of men is far beyond that. There is no certainty how long they stayed there, and part of their stay was a brief stint in jail. What is certain is that her heart was filled with hospitality and she was willing to share her resources with these travelling missionaries.

In this season of parties, meals, and so forth we do well to remember Lydia's story. If we are fortunate to be a host, be an enthusiastic one. Be glad at the chance to make for a pleasing experience for whomever graces your door. If we are the guest be grateful. Show appreciation that you have been thought of for the moment and asked to be served. Give and receive hospitality warmly. Even in the smallest things God looks to the heart of each of us. And so many times those "small" things are in truth enormous. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!