

Marion weekly update

SERMON February 18 "Keys to Kindness: Composure" Ephesians 2:11-18, 1 Samuel 20:28-34

This week we begin a new series for Lent. This is a new one for me. We are part of the Waynesboro cluster. At one of our cluster meetings one of the pastors suggested that we, as a cluster, do a consistent Lent series. Our DS sent a book to all of the pastors in our district about keys to cultivating kindness. This was the suggested theme. So this Lent all four of us in the cluster will preach on the same theme on the same week. On March 10 we will have a pulpit swap where I will head to one of the other churches in our cluster and one of the other pastors will preach here.

This week's theme is composure.

To get out of the gate regarding composure and kindness, composure is absolutely critical. Composure is simply staying calm in the face of stress, aggravation, anger, frustration, etc. So much kindness is forfeited because of a lack of composure. This comes very handily on the heels of last week's message where we looked at the difference between reaction and response. Reaction is letting our emotions rule us while response is us ruling our emotions to handle a situation in the best way possible. Reaction is lack of composure. Response is the fullness of composure.

Let's be honest, all of us have been unkind. We don't want to be, but we do. When we let our emotions rule us, this is all the more likely to occur. We say and do hurtful things. The catch is that as people of faith this isn't acceptable. We are called to be kind. We are called to be kind even when we're angry. "Be angry but do not sin" as scripture says. When we have to give out accountability we do it, but we do it in kindness. I would even say that this is an extension of Christ's command to love our enemies. It's nothing to love those that already love us. Loving those that hate us? That's a challenge, and one we are called to. Kindness is in that same line. Being kind to those who are already kind to us is nothing. Kind to those who are cruel to us? That's a challenge, and one we are called to. Composure is the essence of being able to be kind even in the face of cruelty. We have to be able to set our knee jerk emotional reaction aside, calm down, and respond as God would have us respond. Kindly.

So how do we do this? Certainly there are many ways. Having someone we can vent to is a start. Having a therapist or those who give us solid support and counsel is another. There are many avenues to managing our reactions so that we can respond composed. Ephesians gives us a wonderful tool that if we can get hold of it will eliminate many of those reactions that we have to reign in.

When Jesus went to the cross He did more than accomplish our redemption. He also unified all humanity. Paul says He brought peace to humanity. Peace if we can grasp what He was doing. I suggest that this isn't just about peace in terms of conflict. It's also peace of heart and mind, which is the essence of eliminating conflict. So how does Jesus do this?

He does it by erasing all man made barriers between us. Paul puts it in terms of Jew and Gentile. Neither exist anymore. All are one under Christ. All under the same savior and Lord. All redeemed to the same God. Whether or not we all get on board with that is another matter. For Jesus' purposes there is only one race, the human race. There is only one Kingdom, God's Kingdom. There is only one citizenship, heavenly citizenship. Who will claim it?

If we look at Jew and Gentile the impact is so much bigger than just religion. If there are no barriers it also breaks through the differences amongst Gentiles, and the differences amongst Jews. Jewishness isn't just religion, it's also ethnicity and when we recognize that there are pockets of Jews all over the world even race. All of these barriers are destroyed. Jesus came to let us know all our man made divisions have no place and there is no reason to fight over them. He's erased them and left us with one job. Love one another. That's it. No exceptions. No exclusions. Love each other. Invite the world into the presence of God, redeemed by Christ, and led by the Holy Spirit. Let God change us and let us simply come together, embracing one another before God.

Think about how much stress and angst is caused by these divisions. By nationality, faith differences

(even within Christianity itself), race, gender, and everything else people can find to fight about because they are different. None of it matters. If we can let the Holy Spirit work in us to enliven this sense of Christ's work how much less stress would we have to endure? If we can let go of all the junk people have told us we have to dislike, hate, or shun how much more unity might we find? There are literally voices giving us permission to be unkind to groups of people. What if we just ignored them all?

Losing composure is so often triggered by that stress and angst. Perceived right to hate, be unkind, or exclude because we "don't like" someone. If we do away with this nonsense suddenly our hearts are lighter. We don't have as much to react to. We have greater peace of mind. We have greater peace of heart. This peace leads to composure. And we'll see now why this is so significant when we consider temptation and sin.

Lack of composure is the playground of temptation and sin. When we aren't composed we are off balance. We are suggestible. We are escalated and susceptible to saying and doing things we ordinarily would not. All of this is the breeding ground of sin. Remember, sin is simply missing the mark of God. When people lose composure there is hurt that is incidental, repetitive, sometimes intentional, and a wake of chaos that can ripple far and wide. Saul is a perfect example. His trigger was David. He'd lose his composure in an instant. Here he perceived that Jonathan was taking up with David. He lost his composure because he was so angry and literally tried to kill his own son as a result.

At the end of Judges we see that this lack of composure and off balancing can be more than momentary and individual. It can be corporate. It can last days, weeks, months, even years. When people get off kilter and lose composure if something doesn't correct it, the damage can go on and on and get worse and worse. To make the story brief, there was a Levite who was on the way home with his concubine when they stopped overnight in a town. They were taken in for the night by a stranger and Sodom and Gomorrah style a group of men came knocking and asking for the Levite. Instead they tossed the concubine out to them. The men abused her through the night and she was essentially left for dead at the threshold of the door. The Levite in the morning, in wonderful compassion, said "get up, let's go". This is a whole different problem but not the one we're tackling now. When he gets home and she's died he hacks her up into a dozen pieces sending them off to the tribes of Israel to demonstrate what a horrible thing had happened.

Note how messed up things were at this point. The messed up thing was that she'd been abused. Not that they threw her out to be abused. Not that he callously just told her to "suck it up and get on with it". Not that he thought it was a good idea to chop her up. And let's face it, chopping up the concubine was a clear sense of not being composed.

Then the tribes lose their minds and composure. They decide that since the act happened in the tribe of Benjamin they should just wipe out the entire tribe. Because of the actions of a group of men an entire tribe should perish. And they go after them! They even make a vow that anyone who offer up their daughter to be married to a Benjamite would be cursed. Lack of composure. Lack of thought. Gross and ugly sin. And let's face it, it might not be with guns and knives but there are groups of people that folk feel are fair game to attack, degrade, and alienate just because of who they think they are based on the actions of a few.

Eventually they realize they'd lost their composure and realize that they don't really want to lose a tribe. But there's that curse. What to do? I would suggest that again, perhaps in a panic, they lose composure again. Their ultimate plan to remedy this is as follows. There is a festival coming where the daughters of the other tribes would parade through town. They instruct remaining Benjamite men to hide and wait, and as they parade to run out, snatch up a woman and take her for his wife. That way no one would be cursed because no one "gave away" a daughter. The daughter was taken. No matter what that would mean to the terrified women who were kidnapped...

This was years and years, perhaps generations, of angst and stress on these tribes that had led to a corporate lack of composure that resulted in a devastated social order and spiritual condition.

Composure is essential if we are to spot temptation, see it, and then resist it. Temptation hits us where we are weakest. Which means we have to cultivate as much spiritual and mental peace and

strength to keep presence of self and resist. Scripture tells us the simple formula for avoiding sin is the “resist the devil and he will flee.” It’s hard to resist when we aren’t on balance and calm and clear.

Finally, if we want to walk in the example and image of Christ composure is key.

We are often awestruck at how Jesus handled the scribes and Pharisees. No matter what they threw at Him He had the answer that confused them. He had an answer that both drove home His point and refuted theirs without being disrespectful or ignorant. They couldn’t “one up” Him. Why? Many say it was because He was God and so no one could top Him. I say that’s a lazy answer.

Jesus was fully human. Do we not think He had aggravation and frustration crop up? Do we think He wasn’t tempted to punch back at them? Of course He was!!! But he didn’t. He held the reaction in check and kept His composure. The result was that He could respond to them measured, thoughtfully, and in a way that was both honest and set them back on their heels. And He did it with style and class. Not crudeness and aggressive brusqueness. He sent the right message to the crowds listening in and either caused the ones coming against Him to question their position or return to their masters frustrated themselves.

Composure. He kept His head. He kept His clarity and in doing so was able to answer in fashion compelling to those frustrated with the religious nonsense they’d been living under and silencing to those who had been purveying the nonsense. How can we do the same? Composure. Don’t get rattled. Know our faith, know what we believe, and know that we will NOT be baited into an emotional reaction. We will offer kind, compassionate, and faithful response.

In all that we do composure is key. To be kind, to shun temptation, and to imitate Christ, we must cultivate a sense of composure.

The cultivating honestly has already been done for us. We just need to embrace it. Lose the man made walls that pit us against one another. Let God do the judging, and listen to Christ and let us do the loving. The result changes us and it changes the world.

BIBLE STUDY 1 Samuel 8

Much time has passed between chapter 7 and 8. Samuel is now an old man. We can take it fairly reliably that under his leadership Israel has done much better. In this chapter they are no longer in that time when the Word of the Lord and visions were scarce. Samuel is clearly in regular and close communication with God. Unfortunately they are about to step back in time to an old habit in new packaging.

As if history is repeating itself, like Eli’s sons, Samuel’s boys are abusing their priestly positions. They are dishonest and shady. They are also a distance off from their father. While Eli’s sons were right there with him, Samuel’s are off doing priestly duties in a town not included in his own circuit. Whatever the case in terms of how they became shady, what matters is that now they are a bad representation of what it means to be spiritual leaders. And the people aren’t happy.

As I grew up this story of Israel asking for a king was very harshly presented. There’s a lot to consider here that should give us some grace for their plight. Samuel is old and the ones that would likely be entrusted with leadership are his sons, who are not reliable or trustworthy. They are supposed to be a nation with God as their king. But in this time they needed the prophet to intercede for them and stand in the gap between themselves and God. How can they trust that they will be led correctly when the next in line leaders have demonstrated that they can’t be trusted?

They are afraid of what that will mean. They likely had some recollection of what happened under Eli and his sons and what came before. That was a bad situation. So what can they do? They likely felt between a rock and a hard place. Which humans will they take their chances with? The ones they know to be shady or a king that is unknown? They are opting for a king.

Samuel is angry, and very likely hurt. They are saying they no longer need his services, nor his sons. After serving God and the people his entire life Samuel is being dismissed. His sons are a disgrace. He is not in a good way. Between God and Samuel, Samuel is the more outraged. He is actively trying to persuade them against their request. God is giving them over to their ability to choose. They have

two options, God as king or a man as king. God is willing to let them make the choice and endure the consequences.

Taking a more overview perspective, we see that politics hasn't evolved very far even to our current time. Free will has always factored in to governance and leadership. If we have free will we need to accept that whomever is put in office is put in there by the choice of people, not the forced hand of God. It's convenient to say "God put him/her in there", but it's only convenient when it works to someone's favor. Does God have an idea of who would be best? Certainly. At the end of the day it's the people who make the ultimate decision.

The long warning against what will happen with a king isn't over and done with. As we approach an election this year there is no shortage on either party's side that's painting warning and doom if their opponent is elected. "Go ahead, vote him in. You'll see just how much worse it can get." It's a cycle old as time. The question now is the same as then. Are we looking, truly looking, to God for guidance and wisdom? Or are we simply falling into the party line and influence of like minded people, right or wrong?

The elders come looking for a king. On one hand it's somewhat understandable why they would want this. Trusting some shifty characters to discern the will of God when you don't know if they are being straight with you or not is risky. At least you can see a person, hear the voice, and make a more sound judgement about what's in front of you. Another factor may be at play here. It's likely these elders were more high society than working class. It's certainly possible that they were hoping that given their station a king would be able to be influenced. At the very least being upper society they might be able to shine the king, line their pockets a bit, and have some additional advantage in their lives.

The warning that is given can be seen in more than one light. Yes, there is the military draft, the forcing people into jobs they may or may not want. The entirety of the land is subservient to the wishes of the king. The king can use them as he chooses. There is the ten percent of various things taken from them. Two things come to mind. First, this is an additional tithe. They were already to tithe to God. Now they would tithe to a king which is fitting given that they are choosing the king over God. More practically, this is a tax. We are all taxed every paycheck. Just like in Samuel, the tax isn't freely given. It is taken before we ever see the paycheck.

But might they have seen it differently? Under a king they have central organization and expectations. Someone is finally responsible for making choices for the whole of Israel. Up to now they have just been tribes living in the same area. And it hadn't been working well. They would have a standing army which is important for defense against other nations. Remember, the Philistines and the Israelites seemed to have an ongoing feud. Not everyone will like their job, but hey, there are jobs!!!! They may have seen the trade offs as acceptable. They would also not be unfamiliar with how this looked played out in real time. These rights of a king were already established in the neighboring kingdoms. They may have thought they knew what they were getting into.

The larger issue here is something that may read a little subtly but make no mistake it is enormous. Note what God says to Samuel. "They haven't rejected you, they have rejected me." In elevating a human king over God as King they have just created the issue they had come out of in chapter 7 many years before. Idolatry. Anything we put above God is an idol. It may not be a statue or a "god" per se, but a person, a job, a hobby, anything that takes the place of God is an idol. Israel has just stepped right back into the problem they overcame when they took down the Baals and Asherah poles. The difference is this idol would rule over them.

They say they want the king to "lead us into battle". Who was supposed to lead them? God. Remember in chapter 4 when they went into battle on their own power and got whipped? Then they remembered the Ark and went back to get it, but because of their faithlessness God didn't intervene. In chapter 7 they had it right. When the Philistines were primed to attack they asked Samuel to cry out to God. They put God first and God intervened sending the enemy into such a panic they were easy pickings for the Israelites. Now here they are once again saying they want to go into battle led by a king, not God. The warning is "go ahead, but when you call for me I'm not coming." They are making the bed that they will have to lie in.

The final sadness here is when they want to “be like the other nations”. In Romans, Paul sets out that the Jewish people had two things that made them “chosen”. Chosen wasn’t a favored status. They weren’t better than anyone. Rather they were picked for two tasks to bless the world. The first they had nothing to do with. Through them the Messiah would come. This would happen regardless of themselves. And it did.

The second was that they were to be God’s people. They were to be God’s light in the world. Where the other nations lived apart from God their job was to show what it looked like to live rightly before God. They would live according to God’s design and have a full relationship with God that would be an example for the nations to follow. Sadly in this regard they fell flat. Being just like everyone else removed that sense of “chosenness”. They chose to not be what God had called them to be and so they didn’t stand out.

How tragic. How much does this still happen today? We live in a world where agendas and causes infiltrate and twist the gospel of far too many claiming to represent Christ. When this happens we relinquish our position as a beacon to the world. We are no longer leading them towards God but taking them off track with some adulteration of who Christ really is.

But here is the good news. In a world that is off track in following God. In a tradition where too many have forsaken the Christ that created them for some warped Christ that they have created there is great opportunity. We can step in and show the world what it looks like to be lived out correctly with all the warmth, grace, and humble power that comes with it. We can demonstrate what the Israelites in this chapter forgot. When God is at the center life is far better and more wondrous.