

Marion weekly update

SERMON Easter Sunday

Happy Easter! As we come together to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ I have a very simple thought to share. Love over fear.

Last week we looked at the entry into Jerusalem. Jesus knew what He was doing every step of the way that week setting Himself up for His sacrifice. When it was approaching the time for Him to go to the cross, what triumphed over His fear was His love. Love for us gave the strength to endure an agonizing death. That death in turn terrified His disciples. They hid in fear. What we celebrate today, the resurrection, is what caused their love of Christ to triumph over their fear. They understood His message and love of Christ turned to love for the humanity He died to redeem. And so began the journey of the spread of the gospel. It was spread with a spirit of humility, courage, grace, and love.

Unfortunately as Christianity spread and became a dominant force in the Roman Empire, the messaging shifted. What had crept into Jewish religious leadership crept into Christianity as well. The church became a way to not just talk about Jesus, but also to control the masses. While there were other tools as well, guilt and fear were very real ways that the gospel was manipulated to manipulate believers. Fear of damnation is a powerful thing, and sadly too often the church played on this as a means to keep people in line and to pull money out of believers. Often the money they were trying to pull the believers didn't have.

When this came to a fever pitch Martin Luther had enough and, long story short, broke from the church and began the Protestant movement. Which then in turn broke apart into the many denominations and traditions we see through history and also today.

When all of this kind of mess spawns out of Christianity something is missing in glaring fashion. What is missing is the focus on the genuine love that Jesus calls us to show one another. It becomes about a lot of other things. Power. Money. Influence. Trendiness. Feeling better than others. When the focus fails to be on love all kinds of other things creep in.

Evangelism gets corrupted to the easy tactic of fear rather than the long game of love. Moral correctness with the threat of hellfire is the tool of the day. What about loving people through where they are? The fear of the "you're going to hell" crowd is often that we're not being bold enough about holding people to account for their poor behavior. That's not the case. It's just a different means to the same end of bringing everyone into their fullest most correct life before God. One is a scare tactic that sends the message of a harsh God waiting to punish eternally. The other remembers the words the God "wishes that none should perish". This is the God whose heart breaks at the thought of even one person not being welcomed into God's arms because of self-selection. A God who isn't about scaring people into some fire insurance kind of faith with a foundation of fear. A God who IS about asking the believers "hey, invite them into My presence so I can work on them even more. Be beside them in your mutual struggle to become better and become more. How can they know what it looks like to love God and love neighbor without those who already understand taking the time to model and teach them?"

A continued trend in theology that really clicked into high gear back in the 80s and 90s has made this problem worse. End times theology has crept in to a large portion of Christianity. The truth of it is that the way people grasp this theology is relatively recent in history. Our way of understanding it is not the way it's been understood for most of Christian history. And here's the issue.

End times theology is very fear instilling. It's fear that Jesus is returning any day now and we better have our house in order so we don't get left behind when the believers get yanked off the earth. Now, there's a lot about rapture theology as well that needs addressing but we don't have time for that today. The overarching end times theology is filled with terrifying imagery and with "man you don't want to be around for that". "Get right because the end is nigh." Once again, fear is used to control and manipulate. Faith based in fear isn't faith. It's just a selfish protection plan.

While our brand of end times theology is new, the idea of Jesus' return is not. The early church believed He was coming back in their lifetime. They were wrong. Every generation has had someone

predicting the end. They were all wrong. There have been leaders who've gathered their flocks on a date and time waiting for Jesus. They too were wrong. Getting wrapped up in all this is wasted energy. No one knows. No one will know. All the while people let the fear drive a portion of their theology.

Fear is everywhere today. Socially, politically, religiously. "What if" is rampant. What if this person gets in power? What if this group gets their way? What if this change happens in our neighborhood? It's driven by talking heads posing these questions and offering their own opinions on how things will play out. What is stoked? Fear. Scare your people to fight harder. Scare them to see the other side is inhuman and the enemy. When control is the goal, truth tends to be secondary. And once again, religion is just as guilty as any other.

Instead let the message of the resurrection reign in our hearts. A love of humanity that is so great death would be endured only to come back reminding us that there is no fear necessary. Jesus is the "firstborn from the dead." If He came into new life after the grave the promise is that we will too. In the disciples a love of God so deep that they were inspired to carry Jesus' message to the world even at the cost of their very lives. Fear doesn't create courage. Love does. Fear creates desperation. Love creates hope.

When the talking heads try to stir up fear and pit us against one another remember Jesus. "Love your enemies". When we're told we're being used by whatever powers that be remember Jesus. "Pray for those that use you." When we're told that everything is hopeless remember that Jesus is the hope of the world. How does the world know we belong to Him? By how we dress one another down? By loudly we can proclaim our message? Or is it that we love one another? What about when we're told which sinners are the outcasts? I believe we're told that "love overcomes a multitude of sins."

Fear fights. Love invites. The sacrifice of Jesus is made available to all. The power of the resurrection is open to all. The love of Christ revealed through the Easter weekend is the rallying cry we need. It is the power to heal our communities. It is the power to change the world.

BIBLE STUDY 1 Samuel 13

This chapter is a sort of beginning of the end for Saul. Right off the bat there is a strange detail that seems off. Saul is 30? And he has a son of fighting age? Old enough to lead men? This seems strange. Later we see Saul at Gilgal again through he was also at Gibeah. Gilgal is where Samuel told Saul to wait a good while back. It's unlikely these details jive in a timeline. Saul's age is up in the air as the original Hebrew texts aren't exactly clear. And to be fair, these details of age and Gilgal aren't what this part of the story are about. The writer is making bigger points that don't need to get lost in the details.

Saul is clearly about getting things going with defending Israel. Later in the chapter the Israelites have to go to the Philistines to get their tools sharpened. They don't have blacksmiths. The reality was that the Philistines were essentially lording over Israel. They had enough clout that they disallowed smiths in Israel to prevent them from making weapons. This is significant in that if we read the passages we see that when Israel goes to battle it's not with typical weapons but more with farming implements.

Saul and Jonathan organize an attack on a Philistine outpost. He rallies Israelites to him. When he calls for the "Hebrews" to hear he is making a specific plea. Israelites referred to themselves as Israelites, not Hebrews. Hebrew was somewhat of a slur. Who Saul was likely pleading to were mercenaries that had defected over to the Philistine side. He is calling them to fight for their own nation now. The attack was enough to irk the Philistines into battle. This wasn't just fighting because they were irritated. They were putting down a rebellion.

When Saul's men saw the odds against them they panicked. They hid and fled. They were waiting on Samuel to offer a sacrifice. Remember in chapter 7 something similar happened. Samuel sacrificed before that battle as well. For Israel this was holy war. Holy war required a sacrifice to ask God's favor in the fight. To not offer it was to invite disaster. Saul grows impatient and the sacrifice intended to be offered by Samuel he does on his own. At which point Samuel arrives and harshly scolds Saul.

The punishment for overstepping his duties and being disobedient is that Saul's legacy is destroyed. His family will not sit on the throne forever. This brings us to an important sense of Saul. How we read this exchange depends on whether we see Saul as a villain or as a human falling victim to error.

Seeing Saul as a villain might tempt us to see him as impatiently, arrogantly stepping into Samuel's spot by making the offering. It sounds a bit like blame shifting when Saul says he only did it because Samuel was running late. He felt "compelled" to do the offering. In other words SOMEONE had to ask for God's blessing on this fight. And if Samuel couldn't get himself there then Saul would step up to the plate.

On the other hand, perhaps Saul isn't so brash. He's a military commander getting ready for a major battle. His men are freaking out and afraid because the ritual sacrifice hasn't been made. Somehow he has to get them cohesive again. He has to give them heart that God is going to fight with and for them. Perhaps his choice wasn't out of impatience or brashness, but rather concern for his fighting men and wanting to make sure they have gone rightly before God as the battle looms. Maybe we can find some sympathy for Saul. This new king who has little idea what he's doing in this role.

Nevertheless, Samuel's judgment is harsh. Why would he come down so strong? Remember, the writer of this book is writing from the time of captivity. He knew the history and what got them sent off to Babylon. Idolatry on a national scale. Kings who led the nation astray. How did they do it? They had lackey "prophets" that would speak only what the king desired. Not the true word of God. This is what happens when the kingly ruler also holds the power of a prophet guiding people in their faith as well as governance. Here with the very first king a boundary needed to be set.

Saul, the king, is about military leadership and governance. NOT priestly, prophetic duties. Samuel is the prophet, the priest. It is Samuel's job to bring God's word and oversee the religious rites and practices of the people. It has never been good for the powerful to hold all the narrative control. Ultimately what should have been a guide to faith and holiness gets hijacked in service to the person or people in power. Faith is destroyed. Leadership is poisoned.

This holds true even today. When faith begins to get mixed in with political power rarely does the faith sway the politics. The politics twist and taint the message of faith.

The writer of 1 Samuel isn't just telling the tale of Saul. He is also sending a powerful message to the exiles that never again should they allow the king to have so much authority over the faith of the people. Leave that to the ones whose job it is to offer God's word free from interference, truly, and purely.

As the chapter winds down we see the remark about the blacksmiths. The cost of sharpening is noteworthy because it's more than just a price list. The prices that are being charged are exorbitant. Just one more way the Philistines are making trouble for Israel.

The remainder is a setting of the scene. Chapter 14 will see a mighty victory for Jonathan. The end of 13 sets the stage for a dramatic scene to come!