

“Restored: Finding Redemption in Our Mess---No Messing Around

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

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Rev. Ryan Frack

Palm Harbor United Methodist Church, Palm Harbor, Florida

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

²³ *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.* ²⁴ *The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

It's an honor to be here in this place. I'm a pastor in the Conference - and yet, I don't pastor a church right now. My appointment is to the Children's Home. So, when I preach, my sermons are standalone messages - getting to be a part of this series is a real treat.

Another special privilege for me is to stand in the place where I stood nearly 7 years ago - made the second most important commitment of my life. (SLIDE: WEDDING) A commitment that has shown me both the highs and the lows of myself, and revealed the grace of Christ to me in more tangible ways than I'd ever imagined.

And this is, of course, a very special place for my wife Kristen. It's the place that made faith something tangible for her - where Christ's love became real, and where her commitment to Him began.

Needless to say - this is a powerful time for us to be here.

Kristen and I now have two kids (SLIDE: FAMILY) - an almost 3-year old, and an almost 1-year old. The 3 y/o, Owen, is all boy - and he's all energy. (SLIDE: OWEN) He loves to play and run and read - and he's really been thriving at the school he goes to. One of the things Owen has taught us is how easily kids just pick up things.

When we had kids, nobody told us how sick they'll get - all the time, nobody told us how much they bump into things, and nobody told us that they're like magnets in picking up the things around them. It seems like every day, he's bringing home something that he played in - sand, fuzz, dirt, napkins. Lately, he's been picking up mulch. Bath time brings all types of anticipation, as we're awaiting how much the playground material will come out of his shoes, socks, shirts... The other evening, i noticed a bulge in the back pocket of his shorts - and it was filled with mulch.

Whether Owen intentionally seeks it out, or just happens to pick it up along the way, it seems that mulch, dirt, and dust are bound to be a part of his life for the foreseeable future.

During Lent, y'all have been going through a sermon series called Restored - and you've been reflecting on the ways in which mess (sin) has made its way into our lives. Lent - time of reflecting on our need for God, and the places in which we fall short. Historically, it's a season for us to grieve and lament our shortcomings, as we measure our lives by the standard set by Jesus.

And as you've been doing in your sermon series, Lent tends to focus a lot on sin - the mess that we pick up in our own lives.

Know: Sin creates a mess, but God delights in making us new.

The writer of 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 speaks of God sanctifying the church, and keeping them blameless. (SLIDE: SCRIPTURE TEXT) The Scripture comes as a sort of benediction to Paul's entire letter - encouraging them in right and faithful living, and being a source of encouragements for those who have grown idle in their faith.

But, the gravity of this situation can't fully be appreciated without delving into what we're being sanctified from.

To stop messing around, (SLIDE: TEXT) we navigate a tension between the **depth of our mess** and the **limitless love of God**.

As Christians, we need to do a better job of noticing our sin. Internally. Not in a shame-invoking way; rather, through the lens of honesty. While it's a lot more fun to look at grace, hope, and new life - we can actually cheapen the work of God's grace by diminishing the reality of sin in our lives.

(Last week, you discussed the way that our mess separates us from God - (SLIDE: CROSS BRIDGE) it creates such a chasm that we need the cross to bridge that gap)

Just to clarify what we mean when we talk about "mess" and "sin":

- Billy Graham - "A sin is any thought or action that falls short of God's will. God is perfect, and anything we do that falls short of His perfection is sin."
- John Wesley - "original sin is the corruption of the nature of every man, whereby man is in his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusts contrary to the Spirit."
- Martin Luther, influenced by St. Augustine, wrote of the human condition as "humanity curved in upon itself"

In his book *Restored*, Tom Berlin writes that "All of us share a common problem: our souls are warped. (SLIDE: TEXT) They are bent in ways we did not plan or intend."

Sin is anything that serves as an obstacle to us faithfully following God. Instead of pursuing God, we turn inward and focus on ourselves. It separates us from God, and reorders our priorities. At the Florida United Methodist Children's Home, our youth have experienced a great deal of trauma because of sin (usually the sin of someone else)

Because of the frequency of their traumatic experiences, they have often have grown numb to it.

- Internalize that sin as normal, often seeing it as their fault
- This causes them to doubt who they are, and the inherent worth they have
- Often times, react negatively to it through things like self harm, self medicating behaviors, acting out.

This is why many of our youth struggle with the temptation to just get by. They've gotten used to it.

There's a temptation to believe the image that our mess paints of us.

You might find yourself in the same messy place - defining your worth and identity by the mess in your life. A complicating factor is just how intertwined this sin is in our lives. Eventually, it affects our views of ourselves, the way we treat others, and the way we navigate through the world.

Berlin Exercise: I want us to play around with the idea of sin in our own lives. Think of a sin that you yourself struggle with. You don't need to share it with anybody, and I'm not going to call anyone out; but I want you to think on a sin that consumes a lot of your thoughts, or perhaps one that seems to surface often in your life.

Do you have that in your mind?

Now imagine your life without that sin in it. Miraculously, you woke up this morning, and that thing was no longer in your life whatsoever.

- What physical changes do you notice to your body – breathing more easily? Shoulders feel relaxed? Sitting back in your chair?
- What emotional weights are lifted?
- How does your life look different with that gone?

It's amazing how, even in this hypothetical exercise, many of us experience physiological responses to the mere idea that we wouldn't have to deal with it anymore.

Because the reality for most of us is that this mess has become completely intertwined in our lives. We've learned to function with it.

And what's scary is that – we've become used to it. (SLIDE: TEXT) The messiness HAS BECOME our reality, to the point that we have a hard time imagining our lives without it.

An honest reflection of sin reveals consequences. Sins mean something - our lives bear the weight of them.

Things are set out of balance with each other, with ourselves, and with God.

At the Children's Home, (SLIDE: CHAPEL) our kids have known this first-hand. They've experienced sin in multiple ways, and their lives have been turned upside down as a result.

- Been removed from their homes
- Had to leave schools, friend groups, and communities
- Been exposed to addiction, sexuality, harm, homelessness – at an impressionable age

Their very presence in our care points to the effects of sinful action and/or inaction in their lives. And they feel the consequences in tangible ways.

This is why we have a call to take a good hard look at the mess in our lives, and the way it has affected us. In this way, Lent is meant to be a wake-up call - we've shifted from who we were made to be.

AND...

If we stop there, then we only get half of the story.

Feel: Jesus died for me (atonement).

You see - while Lent focuses a lot of attention on struggle and lament, that's not the sole purpose of Lent. This season is a journey to the cross and Good Friday. But, as Christians, we know that Good Friday isn't the end of the story for us.

Y'all talked about this last week: The cross - where Jesus gave Himself up for us - reminds us of God's power to break the hold that sin has on our lives.

And this isn't done in a vacuum - it's in the middle of our lives.

Romans 5:8 says that, "God showed God's love to us in this way: While we were sinners, Christ died for us."

While we were sinners... Christ died for us. God loves us **in the depth of our mess**

Berlin writes that "The cross is not so much a symbol of pain and death as it is a symbol of love and grace. (SLIDE: TEXT) Here we see God's love, offered for the pardoning of our sin."

The cross means that there is Someone much greater than our mess.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul prays that we be made perfect in Christ and kept from sin. And then he says in vs 24 that (SLIDE: SCRIPTURE TEXT): "the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it"

This is Paul's vouching for the authority of Christ. He didn't believe that God could only bring peace and new life to some of our mess, or only in a part of our lives. Paul prayed that God would sanctify them "through and through." There's not even a fraction of our struggle that God can't transform.

And many of us have a hard time conceiving of that. We have believed the lie that our mess will always be a part of us. Paul has promised that our mess is no match for the love that God has for each of us - and for that, we can rejoice!

God has made a way to pick us up, dust us off, and create new life in and for us.

And this is why we also have a call to look beyond the mess, to the hope that God has offered us. There is no limit to the love that God has for us.

Now – you may be asking: "what am I to do with this?"

First of all: (1) we don't gloss over the real life impact of sin...even when we get to Easter.

When death is past, and resurrection is upon us - we mustn't forget that our mess can have a catastrophic impact in the world.

At the Children's Home, we know that the cross doesn't negate the harm done, nor erase their experiences. RATHER...the cross means that Christ can bring hope. The mess they sit in doesn't define them. No matter what others have said, or what messages the kids have heard, they are worthy of love. Every facet of ministry at the Children's Home seeks to embody that message. They are children of God, and they matter greatly; their mess has no bearing on their worth.

As Christ followers, isn't it time we give ourselves permission to reach higher than the mess.

At the Children's Home, we've seen stories of children who have overcome incredible odds:

(K)

Back in the early 2000's, we had a young lady who lived at Children's Home for 5 years due to some family struggles. After she finished high school and college, she then graduated from law school. She served in family law, giving back to those who experienced the same kind of messiness that she did.

(DC)

Another young man came into our care, and lived at the Children's Home for about a year. He then went home, and found that the environment wasn't conducive to long-term success. A year after discharge, he called us and actually came back to finish up senior year. He graduated high school, is now pursuing college degree, and recently moved into first apartment.

(DW)

We had a child who was in and out of various foster homes, due to his parents' drug addiction. He spent a year at Children's Home. Not only did he graduate high school with 4.0, he also graduated fire college and is now pursuing EMT and paramedic certifications. He was adopted as adult, and is currently serving on staff with our on-campus school.

These children, along with countless others, remind us that our messes don't define us.

Do: Realize and celebrate God's grace through Jesus Christ.

(2) So let us start living beyond the mess.

We have the opportunity, not only to remember our complete reliance upon God, but also to claim victory over our mess. This very day, you can live into the freedom that Christ gives you to (SLIDE: TEXT) STEP OUT OF THE MESS. We have a new identity. Sinning less can't be the ultimate goal. For many of us, we need to stop returning to the mess altogether.

It's hard to understand God's love for us if we can't feel loved by others

The other day, I saw a bumper sticker that read (SLIDE: TEXT): "Jesus loves you, but everyone else..."

(SLIDE: TEXT) doesn't."

While the sticker focuses on the actions of someone, I couldn't help but think of what it's like to feel isolated from those around us.

We struggle to see ourselves as worthy of God's love if we aren't even worthy of love from others.

At the Children's Home, our mission is (SLIDE: TEXT - Mission) "empowering children and families to experience the transformative love of Christ through (w)holistic care." Our first task is to *show* the kids God's love by the way we treat them - and then they might be able to internalize the truth of God's love for them.

- That's done through houseparents patiently walking with a child thru a tantrum
- That's through our school teachers checking in on a child when they notice she's had a rough day
- That's through our Chapel staff comforting a child whose parent again missed a home visit.

It is through the embodiment of God's love for us in the midst of our mess that we begin to grasp our worth in God's eyes.

(cue for band to come up)

I want you to think about people who have embodied love for you:

- People who have made real the idea that you matter.
- People who have loved you, despite the mess you've been through.
- Kristen felt that love here in tangible ways.

Where are you being called to embody that for others? Who, in your life, needs reminding that their value is bigger than their mess? Where is the Holy Spirit leading you to be a voice of affirmation?

As you continue on this journey through Lent, let's commit to the honest work of self reflection. Our journey to the cross should lead to us constantly ridding ourselves of the sin and mess that entangles us.

AND...

May we never cease to live into the promise that (SLIDE: TEXT) our mess is nothing compared to the hope and promise of the One who lives in us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray.