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March 8, 2020

Romans 5:1-4

“Everybody's Welcome. Nobody's Perfect. Anything is Possible.”
John Ortberg

I want you all to know two things right off the bat for this talk. First, I've never been through a harder season in my life. If you're visiting this weekend, I have been on leave for the last several weeks due to poor judgment on my part. I made several mistakes that I so regret, and I have been walking through pain around that which has involved job pain and relationship pain and spiritual pain and family pain and media pain that has just been more intense and raw than stuff I have known, and this is a story that in many ways I am and we are kind of in the middle of and do not know how or when or if it will get fully resolved.

The other thing I want you to know right off the bat is I have never been more grateful to be preaching in my life than I am right now today at this church with all of you. Thank you. I want you all to know this process has been very chastening and very humbling, and I'm immensely glad for that and so grateful for you.

I want you to know it has made me more aware than I have ever been of my weakness, but at the same time I have received strength from God to persist and to seek to be my best self and determined to the core of my soul not to give up from one moment to the next and one day to the next in ways that have been very often clearly beyond my own capacities and in some hidden moments have been deeply moving for me.

I've been discovering the sufficiency of God in places of desperation. I have been discovering words and thoughts and realities of Scripture giving me power a day at a time and sanity for my mind in ways that I have never experienced before, and I can't tell you how often I've just thought, "God, thank you so much for this book and these words!"

I have been discovering God in prayer and then losing him and then finding him again and then finding other people. So many of you have been praying in ways that kept me going when I otherwise would have given out. I've been discovering the truth of an old expression I used to kind of dismiss as a cliché but not anymore. No. I love it. *You will never know God is all you need until God is all you have.*

I have been learning what a strangely helpful thought it is to remember there are right now billions of people in the world who are impoverished or starving or oppressed or trafficked or have gone through something unbelievably catastrophic who would do anything to trade places with me, and some of you are in and have been in great suffering, and if you're not, you will be.

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If I can share some of what I have been learning in this season on this journey, God might use it, and it might have a deeper meaning and a greater hope and help my life be about something more than just me. I have had to lean deeply into three truths, and I want to talk about them with you for the next few moments.

The first one is nobody is perfect. Especially me. I've read a lot in the Bible these last few weeks about humility, like when Peter says, "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand that he may lift you up in due time."

During a several-week span, I had more than 80 meetings one-on-one or in small groups with elders and staff and volunteers and parents and attendees where I would just ask, "How have my actions or decisions or mistakes impacted you or created problems or burdens? There are also maybe other ways I relate or communicate or interact that are a problem. Would you be willing to tell me about some of those?" and people were.

I'm an introvert, so you might think 80 meetings like this would be exhausting, and sometimes some of them were, but it was a strange thing, guys, when I would just say, "I'm going to bracket my natural fleshly inclinations to defend myself or justify or explain, and I'm going to remember there is, therefore, now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Sometimes in the morning I'd just pray those words over and over again. "No condemnation. No condemnation." God reminds me I don't have to sit *in* condemnation, and I don't have to *use* condemnation, which I'm so prone to do.

If I'm in Christ Jesus, I'm just living in another spiritual reality. When I would remember I have been justified by faith and those are not just words so I no longer have to justify my existence by trying to be smart enough or right enough or good enough... When I could sit down with people and say, "My only goal is to listen and try to learn whatever God can show me," these conversations have actually been very freeing for me, and I actually got this wonderful gift of being able to see blind spots and areas where I need to grow and discovering how I could love people better and become a tiny bit more like Jesus.

I'll give you one example. One piece of feedback I got, because I use words a lot, was how I could be too smooth with words. Instead of just directly saying what I think or what I want, I can leave stuff out or try to keep something secret and use words to try to manipulate or direct people. I was thinking about that the next morning.

I had done something I knew a member of my family would not like, and my next thought was, "I have to tell this person that I did this that they won't like," and my next thought automatically was, "How can I narrate this in such a way that it puts me in the best light possible and kind of pressures them not to object to what I've done?"

Then, it occurred to me. That is what I do with words, but I don't have to do that. Instead, I can just say to them, "Here's what I did," and give them the freedom and dignity of not liking it if they don't like it. That's okay. In fact, I realized what I really needed to do was apologize to them first for violating a commitment I had made to them. Nobody's perfect. Especially me.

Here's another way I learned humility through this process. A friend said to me at one point in great love, "John, I think you just need to sit in the pain that various people in our congregation are feeling," and my immediate response was to feel defensive, and I felt like, "What you're saying to me is whoever has the

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worst perception of me you want me to agree with. You want me to just live in shame," and I've been learning a lot about shame and how much more of it I have than I thought.

Then, I realized that's not what this person was saying at all. They were just inviting me to stop thinking of myself for a moment and seek to understand and empathize with all of the members of a congregation who I want to love. That ended up being a great word from God for me and very helpful, and I began to wonder how much of a pattern this resistant and defensive spirit is in my life, so I asked Nancy, "Have you ever experienced that in me? Have you ever wanted to tell me something that might be hard in the moment, but instead of receiving it I get defensive and resistant and withdrawn and distant?"

We've been married 36 years, and you can all guess what the answer to that question was. I thought, "How often does God want to speak a word to me from somebody that would help me be a better person or a better pastor or a better friend or a better dad, but I just push it away?" In self-sufficiency... I don't even have words for it, but I just respond like, "Oh, yeah! I already knew that. I already read that. I already taught that. I already said that," but not now, because I need help too much.

Part of what I'm learning is my capacity to find God in any given moment is directly related to my desperation to need God. In my weakness and need, prayer has become a whole different event for me. I just simply cannot face the day without it. It has nothing to do with being spiritual. Just desperate. Just human.

Some of those rhythms will stay with me. I always used to be in the office super early for a long, long, long time, and my wife would sometimes complain, "I would like to have a husband around in the morning sometimes when I wake up." Through these past few months, I was home, and we would have time every morning to talk and pray, and we both liked it, and we both kind of needed it, so I have decided to just keep doing that and just come into work a little bit later. I will just start with Jesus and then my wife and then work, and that seems like a good order.

This actually leads to another learning I've been leaning into a lot and that is, with Jesus, everybody is welcome by grace alone. Even me. One of the hardest parts about being on leave was I just missed you. I missed being able to worship here. I missed our Life Group. A lot of them are here right now. I missed getting to talk to the team. I missed getting to say, "My name is John. I'm a sinner," and having you all say, "Hi, John."

My wife and my mom and my sister and my brother and my friends, Rick and Chuck and Sam and Pat, and family members and other folks made up a team, and I don't understand that, but you all know about this. Somehow the deeper the difficulties we face together the deeper the bonds that form us. I don't know why hard times do that, but they do, and I promise you I would not be walking through this season if I were walking alone.

One of the passages I spent several days with over the last few months is when Jesus said to his friends in the garden of Gethsemane, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." He is so vulnerable in this. I was so struck in this season. He's afraid to be alone almost like a little child. "Stay here with me. Will you?"

I've never felt so vulnerable before with people up close or with people I don't even know. I've needed to lean into this truth, because one of my great idols is reputation and image management, and over the last few years I keep needing to learn to just die to that. When Nancy and I came to Menlo 16 years ago, we

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left a remarkable church in Chicago that really innovated making unchurched people feel welcome at church. The church used to have two midweek services devoted to believers and four services on the weekend devoted to people who were seeking (unchurched folks).

A woman came up to me one time and said, "I've noticed you've been preaching double duty lately quite a lot, both in the midweek services and on the weekends, and that's a lot. Are you doing okay?" I was touched by her concern and said, "Yeah, I'm doing okay." She said, "Good, because I've been trying to bring my unchurched boss to church for years, and he's finally coming for the first time this weekend, and I noticed you're preaching again. Don't screw up!"

When Nancy and I came here to Menlo, we were often invited to speak back at services or conferences related to our old church. Then, several years ago, a really difficult problem emerged at our old church, and Nancy and I found ourselves very much not at our own initiative having to navigate a situation that was very weighty and very sensitive. Then, after years of no resolution it became, at least in the little church world where we live, quite public, and I thought I had learned to let go of reputation.

Then, over these past weeks as we've walked through this season at Menlo, as some of you know, this situation has also been written about in ways that can be quite public, and it will trouble me what people think or things I want to correct, and God is teaching me. I was in Peet's a couple of weeks ago to get coffee. I was standing in line, and there were a bunch of copies of the local paper there, and I saw on the front page the headline was Menlo Church. I thought, "That's kind of cool. We're in the paper."

Then, I looked more closely, and there was my picture, and it was not a story I liked at all. My first instinct was just to run out of there. "I would rather be decaffeinated than have to be here." I felt very exposed, and the thought that came was, "No, John. My calling on you is not to hide in shame. It's not to defend and explain and self-protect. Just stand with humility and confidence in me."

All I am is one more flawed person for whom, nonetheless, Jesus died. Only God knows the full extent of how truly messed up I am, and his concern is not my reputation or my circumstances but my character. One of the thoughts that has been very helpful to me in these last weeks is that what matters is not how things turn out; what matters is how I turn out, and no human being in the world has the power to get in the way of that. God is a God of grace, and that means everybody is welcome.

I have been learning about that as a dad. Church is often described as a family, because family, especially, is to be a place where everybody is welcome. I want to say just a word about that because, as some of you know, that has become part of a public story, and you all are my church family, so I want to say a word but only a word. Mostly, it will stay private because it is very personal.

We have three children. Every one of them is unique, and every one of them is precious. I have loved every one of our children the best I can as God helps me from the day they were born, and I will love them all until the day I die. I just want you to know that. If you're here today and you know something of family pain, me too. If you're here today and you're hoping God will work out something in relationship but you don't know how or when or if, me too.

I usually think of myself as a pretty high-energy person, but I have found myself in this season often not feeling that way and often just struggling to generate energy that would usually kind of flow. Nancy said to me at one point, "I think you're depressed." No surprise. "I think you should be taking something." I said, "I don't think so. I think if I were depressed, I would know about it. Which one of us has a degree in

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psychology? Not you." She said, "Benjamin Franklin said, 'The man who treats his own self has a fool for a doctor.' Which one of us would that be? Not me either."

I asked my counselor, "Do you think I should take something?" and my counselor said, "Yes." I asked my friend, Rick, who is a psychologist, "Do you think I should take something?" and Rick said, "Yes." I prayed about it and asked Jesus, "Do you think I should take something?" and Jesus said, "I've already told you your prayers are depressing me. Put me down for a, 'Yes,' too," so if any of you find yourself needing medical help for depression or anxiety or any mental health condition or if you find yourself feeling weak or needy or inadequate, all I can say is, "Get in line. Join the club."

Everybody is welcome here. Young or old, rich or poor, hurt or healthy... Whatever your religious or spiritual or economic or sexual or ethnic or emotional background or orientation or status, everybody is welcome here. Nobody is perfect. Everybody is welcome. Thank God, thank God, thank God there is the third great truth I'm leaning into, and that is anything is possible.

Anything is possible with God. Not with me. Not with me. I'll be honest with you. There have been some times during these past few months when I thought, "I don't think I can do this. I don't think I can take it. It just feels impossible. I kind of think I'd just rather bail. I've been here 16-1/2 years. That's long enough. I'm 87 years old. That's old enough. Maybe I'll just leave."

I'll tell you what I think. Leaving day will come for everybody sooner or later, and I want to be open before God in my heart and my family and our leadership and our circumstances and our church. Leaving day will come, but not today. Not because it's hard. The hard is what makes it great. There's another passage in the Bible that has become a lifeline for me, and I recite it over and over and over.

In Romans 5, Paul says, *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith..."* I think about how much of my life has just been about justifying my existence. It's like God is saying, "I'm going to take a lot of that away from you. Now, you just receive your justification, your worth, and your value as a gift." *"...we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings..."*

Who says stuff like that? *"...we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit..."* We glory in suffering. I'm learning...I know in just tiny little ways...to glory, but I don't want to miss that glory. Sometimes I'll write down in a journal in the morning the spiritual opportunities that lie before me in a season of challenge, and it helps me so much. I do this quite often.

"I can become more resilient today. I can have more compassion for the suffering of others and not just think about me so much. I can learn to trust God more (like really trust him). I can serve my wife and my family in a time of need. I can model hope when it's not easy. I can be less dependent on circumstances. I can grow inner strength. I can become the man my dog, Baxter, thinks I am. I can live in such a way that when I come to die I do not look back on these days with bitter regret." I can't do that. That day is getting too close.

In some odd ways, part of what I'm learning is difficult days are like the days of deepest spiritual opportunity, "For with God," Jesus said, "all things are possible." It's so strange. I've had a lot of

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conversations about this situation and about my mistakes with a lot of folks at our church, and very often it has been kind of difficult, and my fear was shame or rejection, but what I have found instead is love and grace and caring way beyond what I could have imagined, and so many of you have written notes and letters and cards and emails, way more than I have ever gotten at any church ever in my life.

In the last six weekends, I have gone to six different campuses, and the love and the grace and the mercy has just overwhelmed me and Nancy, who has come with me. The phrase that keeps coming up from so many people is, "Stay strong," and I want you to know I promise I will. Obviously, we want to be really careful about contagion and so on, and we're thinking about ways to pray, but people just want to touch, so I've had more elbow shakes and fist bumps and head butts and shoe taps than I can count, and I will hug anybody this weekend telepathically. I'm so grateful.

It's the strangest thing. I didn't see this coming. I'm receiving more love in my weakness than I ever received in my strength. It is, I guess, the way the gospel works. At a time when I never experienced the love, I never expected the congregation to give out love. Let me say it one more time. At a time when I never expected the love of a congregation less, I never experienced it more. Anything is possible, so where do we go from here? What should we do now?

I will tell you what I'm going to do now as God helps very much one day at a time in the middle of a story the end of which I do not know, I promise you I will seek to re-earn and retain your trust as best I can. I will try to learn and to love and to grow and to worship and to live humbly before God and to be real and to contribute the best I can and to be my best self and to devote myself to my calling from God as God allows as a great gift to be seized with great joy, even when there is pain one day at a time, not forgetting this season. It is too deep, at least for me.

It has made and will make some things different. I think I will feel more pain at least for a time. I think I will feel more weakness, but that's not bad, because my God says, "My grace is sufficient for you." Paul says, "When I'm weak, then I'm strong." Part of what that means, gang, is you never know. You don't know when something happens how it will turn out in the long run or how God will use it.

Because there is this book full of stories where Joseph goes from a prison to a throne, where Israel goes from slavery to the Promised Land, where Daniel goes from a lion's den to a palace, where Esther goes from a harem girl to a hero, and where Peter goes from ratting Jesus out to the rock of Jesus' church. What if the story is not done yet? What if it turns out in the context of the grand story which has at its center a crucifixion that leads to a resurrection...? What if this season or this story becomes a part of that larger cross-marked, tomb-emptied story?

What if I could be known by people in my life, by you (this church), more deeply and fully than I have ever experienced with a church not just in whatever gifts I have or learning or things that I think matter but in my faults, in my hurts, in my sin, in my fear, in my pain, and in my scars? What if God were to use the pain and uncertainty of this situation to build deeper relationships and a more inclusive and healing community than he ever used all of our talents and strengths? What if it really is true that his strength is made perfect in weakness and as we bring more and more weakness he brings more and more strength?

What if, "Everybody is welcome, and nobody is perfect, and with God anything is possible," becomes more and more realized here? People in addiction and people in recovery and people going through homelessness and joblessness and people on their third divorce or abortion or prison sentence or people just tired of trying to pretend that everything is perfect and trying to pretend not to be anxious or

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depressed or desperately sad or jealous or angry or wounded or people with unwanted thoughts or people with secret shame all met together here with no masks and all met like we had no reputations at all?

In fact, what if we all celebrated the recognition of total, mutual, personal inadequacy, and confession and repentance and humility and healing and acceptance and servanthood and courage in Jesus' name gained a new birth of redemptive power in our midst? What if we all doubled down on Jesus and doubled down on the cross and doubled down on the gospel and doubled down on the resurrection and got on with it?

Get on with the mission of seeking to know Jesus and be the agents of faith and hope and love serving in neighborhoods and schools and offices and shops and hospitals and homes and at the border and on the margins with the unremembered and the uncared for and the unheard and the unseen? I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want to miss that. I'd like to stick around for that. I'd like to be a part of that. Let's pray.

Thank you, God, for this remarkable idea of the church as a place of love and healing and grace. Especially, God, thank you for Jesus, the only one in whom we find either hope or healing. May his Spirit and power have a renewed birth in me and in us! We pray in his name, amen.