

“In the Midst of the Mess”
Joseph J. Clifford, D. Min.
Text: Romans 7
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This week we continue our series, “Who Am I?” Last week, Michelle reminded us in a powerful way that we are all beloved children of God, made in God’s very image. This week we face the reality that we are broken. God’s image within us is distorted by sin. We see that in the murder of Abel we’ve just heard about. The Apostle Paul writes of the impact of that sin in his letter to the Romans. Listen again for God’s word to us this day, from Romans 7, beginning at verse 14:

¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. ¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self; ²³but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

As was mentioned earlier, today marks the 100th anniversary of the Armistice that ended World War 1. It was called, “The War to end all wars,” yet in truth it became the peace to end all peace. The harsh terms placed upon the Germans by the Treaty of Versailles would cripple the German economy, playing a role in the evolution of the Nazi Party and the demonization of the Jewish people, sowing seeds that would lead to the holocaust and World War II. The Treaty of Sevres that broke up the Ottoman Empire created the modern Middle East, placing kings friendly to the West in newly created countries like the British Mandate of Iraq, the British Mandate of Palestine, and the French Mandate of Syria and Lebanon. This would lead to revolutions through the 20th century to cast off Western powers in all those countries. It’s no accident many of these countries are rocked by war today. The story of Cain and Abel continues to unfold before us. One hundred years after the “War to End All Wars,” things are still a mess.

Looking at our nation, we have faced yet another mass shooting this past week, this time in Thousand Oaks, CA. God bless those people who not only must deal with the grief of this shooting, but now face the destruction of wild fires, with dozens killed. This shooting left twelve people dead, plus the shooter, reportedly a veteran who suffered from PTSD. This is the 307th mass shooting in 311 days in our nation, almost one a day. 328 people killed this year in these events, over 1,200 injured.¹ While I certainly believe in the power of prayer, friends, “thoughts and prayers” are not adequate to address this plague. We have a serious problem in our society. What are we willing to do? We cannot let this madness become the new normal in our country. It is a mess.

In the wake of mid-term elections, the divisions of our nation were once again laid bare. No matter your political persuasion, there was good news and bad news Wednesday morning. No matter your political

¹<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2018/11/08/thousand-oaks-california-bar-shooting-307th-mass-shooting/1928574002/>

persuasion, you may find yourself wondering how the other 50% of the nation can vote for “those people.” Yet we are all in this together. It’s a mess.

The apostle Paul describes this mess in individual terms, using the “universal I,” as scholars put it. “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Put another way, “I’m a mess.” Paul knows he’s not the only one caught in this mess. He knows that this reality is part of the human condition. We can try and try but for some reason, we just can’t seem to get there. And when we do make progress, we find that the progress has a way of simply creating new problems. In my lifetime, cures for many cancers have been developed. Lives are being saved. But now that lifespans are extending, how do we provide health care for all our population? “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it,” as Paul put it. “You ain’t go to, but you can’t help it,” as Shirley Guthrie summarized it. It’s a mess. I’m a mess, you’re a mess, we’re a mess. The whole world’s a broken mess.

During our years in Dallas, with two kids growing up and both Jennifer and I working in demanding jobs, we found it hard to keep our home “decent and in order,” as we Presbyterians like things. We decided to splurge a little and bring in a house cleaning service. Our budget could absorb a visit every other week from the wonderful women who cleaned our home. Of course, in between cleanings, it did not take long for things to get messy again. Inevitably, the night before the cleaning service would come, what do you think we were doing? We were cleaning up the house. I remember wondering out loud, “Why is it that we have to clean up the house before the cleaning service comes? I thought we splurged to save ourselves this work!” We needed to clean up our mess before the clean-up could begin.

Sometimes I wonder if we don’t think about our spiritual lives the same way. We seem to believe that we need to get the mess cleaned up before we can welcome God into our lives. We need to get things right before God would have anything to do with us. We have a hard time getting past the mess.

Youth Specialties Founder and pastor, Mike Yaconelli begins his book, *Messy Spirituality* this way: “My life is a mess. After ... years of trying to follow Jesus, I keep losing him in the crowded busyness of my life. ... For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a godly person. Yet when I look at the yesterdays of my life, what I see, mostly, is a broken, irregular path littered with mistakes and failure. I have had temporary successes and isolated moments of closeness to God, but I long for the continuing presence of Jesus. ... I want to be a good person; I don’t want to fail. I want to learn from my mistakes, rid myself of distractions, and run into the arms of Jesus. Most of the time, however, I feel like I am running away from Jesus into the arms of my own clutteredness. I want desperately to know God better. I want to be consistent. Right now the only consistency in my life is my inconsistency. Who I want to be and who I am are not very close together. I am not doing well at the living-a-consistent-life thing.”² His words resonate with me. How about you? So often we believe we’ve got to clean up the mess before God will have anything to do with us.

Last week I had the privilege of attending Credo. It’s a week-long spiritual retreat sponsored by the Board of Pensions of the PCUSA, designed to address what can all too often be the mess of pastors’ lives. It is one of the great blessings our denomination provides. The program is holistic, addressing not only spiritual aspects of life, but also physical, psychological, and financial realities. Each Credo conference is led by a team that includes a psychologist, a medical doctor, a financial planner, a spiritual director, a vocational specialist, and a benefits expert from the Board of Pensions. I am profoundly thankful to the Session and the congregation, and to my amazing colleagues for holding down the fort and enabling me to experience Credo so fully.

² Mike Yaconelli. *Messy Spirituality*., pp. 26-27 of AppleBooks version.

In the holy space of that spiritual retreat, with life quieted down enough, slowed down enough to really pay attention and see, and with the help of proven guides for the journey, some of the messiness of my own life came into focus for me. In the video that opened the sermon, the word that struck me the most was “guilt.” Guilt is part of the mess within my soul. It can lead to defensiveness and anger that make things more of a mess. Thankfully, the anger typically only gets expressed during Auburn football games! It’s there because of aspects of my family of origin. While I was deeply loved, as I’ve shared before, my father battled alcoholism and severe mental illness. That ultimately cost him his life by his own hand. As an adult child of an alcoholic, and a survivor of suicide, I have a double whammy for guilt in my life. That guilt born of my childhood attaches itself to all kinds of things. You name it, I can feel guilty about it. That phone call I failed to make, that over-reach in a sermon, that honey-do I didn’t get done—these kinds of things can really mess with me. Even the blessings of my life; my family, my vocation, my call to be the pastor of this great church, can leave me feeling guilty. What about all those good people in the world who don’t know such blessings?

As I was working on defining my core values at Credo, I found myself feeling guilty about them. I say I value compassion, but do I really? How often am I more callous than compassionate? I say I value courage, but what about the times I turtle in the face of a challenge? I say I value justice, yet my life is awfully “bougie,” as the kids say these days. I’ve got a golden doodle! I was sharing my guilt about all this with Chandler Stokes, the lead “guru” at Credo, and he said to me, “Joe, what if God loves you?”

For twenty-one years I’ve been preaching about God’s love for you and God’s love for the world. I’m embarrassed to admit that considering God might actually love me was something of a revelation. My life is messy; don’t I have to get things cleaned up first? What if God loves me right now, “Just as I Am,” as the old hymn puts it, right here in the midst of the mess? The next day, during a time of discernment and reflection, I went on a walk wondering if this was the word God wanted me to hear. It felt self-centered, almost selfish to embrace the thought that God loved me. I felt guilty about that—can you imagine? As I was walking down the trail, I came across this rock:



I’ll confess, I’m usually pretty wary about “signs.” God’s very busy with this mess of a world, but this one was hard to miss. After sharing my experience with my colleagues, and confessing that it’s hard for me to believe in signs, we stepped outside on a break and a friend said, “Still don’t believe in signs, Joe? Look at that cloud.” (SHOW PICTURE 2)



What if God loves me? I know God loves you, do you know God loves you? Right here in the midst of the mess, the mess within our lives, the mess in midst of wild fires and wild elections and the wild west of continued mass shootings, God loves us. Do we know that?

Paul did. After his guilt-ridden rant about doing the things he doesn't want to do and not doing the things he wants to do, after rolling around in the guilt of being a wretched man, where does he land? "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" It's not even a complete sentence. He recognizes that even though he's a mess, God is with him in Christ. God loves him in the midst of that mess. He doesn't have to clean it up first. In the brokenness of his life, he is loved by God.

So am I. So are you. So is this mess of a world. Loved by God, we are freed to love ourselves, which enables us to love one another. Loving one another just might make a difference in this messy world in which we live. Loving one another, we just might find that peace that passes all understanding to guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.