

Life's a Mess

Our Epistle Reading this morning comes from 2 Corinthians 4:5-12. Listen now for a word from God.

⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus's sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, "Light will shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, ⁹ persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, ¹⁰ always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who are living are always being handed over to death for Jesus's sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us but life in you.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Have you ever made an absolute mess of things? The kind of mess where you don't even know where to begin cleaning up? I remember one time growing up

when I was old enough to be trusted to be at home by myself, without a babysitter, for the few hours after school before my parents got home, but young enough that that still felt like a big responsibility. I was supposed to come home, take the dog for a walk, and get started on my homework before the neighborhood carpool arrived to take me off to soccer practice. That's what I was supposed to do. But as I opened the pantry one day, looking for an afternoon snack, and seeing the box of cherry jello on the shelf, I decided I would do that instead. Mistake #1. I started on the recipe, boiling the water, pouring it over the cherry jello powder packet, and stirring it in until all the powder was dissolved. As I stirred, I carried the pot of hot jello/water mixture over to the living room to turn on the tv, tripped, and spilled the cherry jello all over the carpet in the living room. Mistake #2. I quickly ran to get the carpet cleaner and paper towels, but even after spending an hour doing my best to clean it up, there was still an enormous cherry red jello stain all over the carpet when the carpool arrived to pick me for soccer practice. Unsure of what to do, and afraid to face the consequences, I left the stain, grabbed my bag, locked up the house, and left for soccer practice. Mistake #3.

The title for this sermon is "Life's a Mess" because as we continue to recover from the hurricane last weekend, even with the acute crisis of the storm over, it feels like there is so much cleaning up to do. For me, it started with cleaning out my fridge and freezer, throwing away all the food that had gone bad.

Wiping down the shelves. Tackling the pile of laundry and dirty dishes that have built up over the last two weeks. In our community, teams of workers have been cleaning up debris from fallen trees in the streets. And in our work and school lives, we have turned to the work of putting things in order. Assessing what was missed over the last couple of weeks, rescheduling events, quickly preparing for those things which are suddenly much closer on our calendars than we realized.

And it's uncomfortable to be in that place where life is still a little bit messy. Like good Presbyterians, we would rather have things decent and in order. We would love for things to return to normal as quickly as possible, and the disruption to exit our lives as quickly as it arrived. We would love to handle whatever life throws at us with a sense of cool. Sometimes, we even ignore the messes, content to pretend they don't exist, or smile like everything is fine, even when it's not. We wonder what to do with the places of our lives that cannot be easily tidied, picked up, wiped down. The disruption to school and work schedules, our patterns of daily living. The grief for places where there was much greater destruction. The fear that may remain that something like this could happen without warning. Even when the cleaning up is done, it may seem that life remains messy.

Paul of course, is no stranger to the messiness of life. His second letter to the church in Corinth follows what he calls "a painful visit" with the Corinthians. And while we don't exactly know what caused the visit to be painful, there was some

kind of altercation which has disrupted their relationship. In Chapter 2 Paul says “[I write to you]out of much distress and anguish of heart, and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.” His relationship with this church isn’t firm, neat, all put together. Concerns have started to arise among the Corinthians about Paul’s leadership, his integrity, and his authority. And so, as he writes, Paul acknowledges that there is some cleaning up to do.

This letter is Paul’s way of picking up the pieces, of putting things back together with these people, this community that he loves. And so, in this letter, Paul talks a lot about life and death, about repentance and forgiveness, and about reconciliation. And for Paul, this work is central to what he believes about Jesus. He says, “For we do not proclaim ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as servants for Jesus’s sake.” As much as he might like to walk away from the messiness of his relationship there, cut his losses on the church of Corinth, and go on as if nothing happened. He can’t. And so he dives into the messy and uncomfortable work of repairing their relationship together.

At the heart of our text for today is the image Paul uses, “but we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” I’m struck by the juxtaposition of these two images. On the one hand, the precious treasure that is the “light of

knowledge of the glory of God in Jesus Christ.” And on the other simple, ordinary clay pots. Clay pots which are made from the most ordinary, common material, earth mixed with water. Clay pots, which if you’ve ever taken a pottery class, are quite messy to make, leaving you covered in mud and slip. Clay pots, which can be fragile, and can break, and get dropped.

Paul says that this is the way we carry Christ within us. We are the pots. Ordinary, fragile, messy. And yet we carry within us something which is so precious, that can shine into the most shattered places of our lives. He says, “we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.”

Paul is appealing to their shared faith, and experience as early Christians, which was often characterized by persecution at the hands of roman authorities, struggle against powers which felt threatened by the growth of this movement of early Christians. But Paul is also speaking to the fragile nature of their relationship together, still tender from the pain of their recent visit. Still full of unresolved feelings, and words left unsaid. Still uncertain if there is a way forward together.

For Paul, the ordinary, messy, fragile places of our lives aren't something to be avoided, swept under the rug, tucked neatly away. They are the places where we encounter the risen Christ who entered the messiness of the world. Who took on flesh and became ordinary and fragile. And who died, so that even the messiest, most tragic places of our lives might be redeemed and transformed by the grace of God.

Last week, as we celebrated communion together, we proclaimed the death of Jesus Christ. And even as I say those words, the messiness of the crucifixion, they make me uncomfortable. I'm much more comfortable with clean and tidy language of resurrection, of new life, and of Easter. But as we proclaimed the vulnerability of a God, in a moment where so much of us felt our own vulnerability... As we proclaimed the transformation of death, in a moment when death felt so present... I am sure that we carried the light and life of Christ.

And the life of Christ was revealed again and again, in the ways we showed up in the messiness of the world two weeks. In the cleaning up, and in the places where no amount of cleaning would help. Christ was there in all the ways our community came together, as we shared resources, as we offered care, as we waded in the messy uncomfortable waters of cleaning up. Christ was there as people gathered each morning to make coffee for one another each morning. Christ was there as restaurants distributed food to neighbors without power. Christ was there

as United Ministries collected donations to distribute to the community. Christ was there when you opened your home to someone to take a hot shower who still didn't have power. Christ was there as you navigated with uncertainty the reopening of schools, and childcare. Christ was there when you sent that text message checking in on your neighbors, your family, your friends, Because the messiness of the world is precisely where Christ shows up.

I remember that day I spilled Jello on the carpet, my mother telling me that she was upset about the stain, but she was more upset that I hadn't told her about it. That I had continued on as though nothing had happened. I wonder how that day may have been different if I had been able to admit what had happened, ask for help, and own the mess I had made.

And I wonder what it would look like for us to own the messiness of our lives, and of the world. What it would look like to be a church that was honest about the mess, both the ones we've created, and the ones we find ourselves in, through no fault of our own. And I wonder about a church that enters into the discomfort of the world's messes, trusting that Christ will show up, and that we will be transformed. Amen.