

“Lent’s Messy Middle”

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Scriptures: Romans 7:12-25; John 2:13-22

I began writing this sermon sitting in a camp chair on the lawn of another church. We find in the Ryden house, with two working parents, that we are in need of childcare. And I don’t know if you are aware of this, but there is an incongruence between the demand for childcare, particularly affordable childcare and the supply for the same - not only here in East Tennessee, but across the country. And this means you have crazy parents sleeping in parking lots to keep their spots in line for the limited spots available in childcare programs. I was one such crazy parent on Monday night and into Tuesday. As you may expect, I was tired. Thankfully I wasn’t too cold. More than anything, there were moments of such profound monotony that I found it hard to not get bored. And that was the real endurance task, keeping present in the moment and focused on the task at hand, not getting swallowed up by the gloom of an empty moment. That is where I needed help. I needed mental, emotional, and spiritual endurance.

We have reached it, the endurance phase of Lent. We are three Sundays in, not quite half of the way through the forty days of fasting, but long enough where if you are like me, some of the fatigue has begun to set in. If you are reading along in the Lenten devotional by Fr. Esau McCauley, you may have read this from his commentary on this phase of our Lenten journey. He writes: “By the time we make it to the third week our initial enthusiasm has started to wane. The excitement of

fasting and a renewed commitment to God has started to waver. We are still too far from Easter to be excited about the celebratory end of the fast, and we are too far from the beginning to remember our initial repentance.”¹

That is a good way of saying that we are in the “messy middle” of Lent. One thing that Lenten disciplines, or rather the failure to keep Lenten disciplines, does perfectly is to bring us face to face with our limitations and failures. The messy middle is the time where that starts happening. It is not easy to see our imperfection, and not just our imperfection, but our sins, looking back at us in the mirror. It is not a pleasant thing to be aware of our shortcomings, the things we have done and left undone that we confess in our prayers.

We can take heart that the Apostle Paul was well-acquainted with this feeling. Remember the often quoted passage, often quoted probably because the English translation has the word “do” in it more than most sentences you will ever hear:

“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.”²

¹ McCaulley, Esau. *Lent: The Season of Repentance and Renewal*. The Fullness of Time series, 65.

² Romans 7:15-20

That can be a little difficult to follow, but the principle is one we have all experienced. We know what is right, we even in our hearts desire to do what is right, and yet, we do wrong. Sin enters in and corrupts us. We participate in our own corruption.

And while that passage can indeed be a mouthful, the cry of desperation at the end is clear. "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" That is the feeling of failure, the messy middle of Lent. We've reached our limit, and there is nothing we can do to rescue ourselves.

I have had a couple rounds of sickness recently, and they have been a bit more frequent and intense than I am used to. I blame the small person in our house who can't seem to stop putting his mouth on everything. In the midst of a particular bout of sickness, I will sometimes get to thinking that I will never feel well again. It is the worst when the extreme soreness in my throat makes it feel like I have a knife blade stuck inside there everytime I swallow. I begin to wonder, sometimes, if I will ever swallow without pain again. I long for the non-feeling of "normal." I feel like there is no escape, that sickness will never end.

Longing for rescue from the curse of sin and death feels a lot like that. When it comes to this life, there is not ultimately an escape from death. We remember from Ash Wednesday that we are dust and that is where we will be returning. As our bodies age, as some of us deal with chronic pain or illness, we are quite aware that we have limits, that we are going to die. That is the sort of struggle the Apostle Paul is speaking of, not so much with physical ills, though he dealt with plenty of those as

well, but in wrestling with his own propensity to sin and live in opposition to God's best. He rightly saw that end as death.

"Wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of death?" I see Paul throwing up his hands in desperation as he writes these words. I think it is good to pause before we read on. Don't move on from that question too quickly, let yourself feel it. There can be a tendency in the life of a Christian to downplay the struggle, not only with outside forces, but with our own continued struggle with our own sin. We like to pretend that everything is ok. We like to have it look like we have it all together. We act like we meet Jesus and then it is all sunshine and rainbows. We act like a cry for rescue from a body of death is not something we would ever even consider after we have been walking with Jesus. Pause after the question.

But it is also not right to pretend like the question of who will deliver us from death doesn't have an answer. "Thanks be to God," Paul says, "through Jesus Christ our Lord." While we do not deny death and sin, we do deny that they have the last word. Jesus comes to rescue us, deliver us, Paul says, bringing to mind the image of deliverance of the Exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea.

The deliverance of Jesus, though, doesn't always look like a parted sea or a pillar of fire leading a people through the wilderness. Jesus shows us in the Gospel for today that sometimes deliverance looks like a whip made of cords driving out the money changers from the Temple. Consider that God's deliverance and God's judgment are the same action stemming from the same desire for his people to be holy and free. Notice how John notes that the cleansing of the Temple takes place at the feast of

Passover, where the people remembered the delivering love of God from slavery in Egypt. Jesus' cleansing of the Temple was another act of deliverance.

Those in captivity need liberation. Those in addiction need intervention. Those captivated by the idols of the world need to have those idols smashed. It all comes from the same love of God. The one who parted the Red Sea brings that same force to bear on the unclean things polluting his Temple and his beloved children who worship there. "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade."³

The Scriptures teach us that we are now the Temple of God's Holy Spirit. We are the place where his glory dwells. The curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of Creation was torn in two at the death of Jesus and the Holy Spirit descended upon the people of God at Pentecost, just as Jesus said. That we are the Temple is the logic Paul uses for urging purity among believers in his letter to the Corinthians.⁴

And if we are the Temple of God's presence, if we are the place that heaven and Earth are to become one and God's presence is to dwell, we will often find, with the reality of our sin, that we need the cleansing presence of Jesus. We need to have the light shone on the corners of our lives and everything that is not of God driven out.

If we are indeed the temple of God, many of us welcome the Jesus coming into the Temple at Candlemass, but we fear his coming to cleanse the idols from within us. When Jesus comes to the Temple at the Feast of Candlemas, as we celebrated just a

³ John 2:16b

⁴ 1 Cor 6.

few weeks ago, he comes as a baby, humble and mild, showing us the gentleness and love of God. This kind of coming we can get on board with. We invite that sort of presence into the temple that is our very selves every time. But we are more hesitant to accept the cleansing presence of the Jesus with a whip of chords, seeking to drive out the idolatry in our lives.

But the cleansing is the deliverance that Paul speaks of. "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Facing our sins is never fun, but it is always for our good. We know this of course - any malady we face, in our physical health, our mental health, does nothing but get worse when we ignore it or pretend it is not there. Healing cannot begin until we acknowledge the problem and start taking steps to fix it. So it is with our spiritual health. No matter the cost of repentance, the cost is far greater if we ignore our sins and shortcomings.

So as we sit in the messy middle of Lent, I invite you to consider what areas of your life need the cleansing presence of Jesus. My purpose with this invitation is not to draw you into shame or despair, but to hope in the only One who can truly make you clean. Your sins do not make you worse than anyone else in the same way that your repentance or works of righteousness do not make you better than anyone else. The choice of repentance is simply the choice to accept the grace of God's healing.

So I ask again, what are the places that need to be cleansed? Jesus said of the Temple in Jerusalem that it had become a house of trade. What about your house? What kind of house does it have a tendency to be? A house of strife? A house of envy? A house of lust?

Whatever the case may be, the Lord stands ready to cleanse the Temple of our hearts. No job is too big for him. So confess your sins and repent. He is merciful and ready to receive you. That same force that cleanses the Temple also stands ready to protect it. We don't clean things we don't care about. We don't cleanse things we don't intend to keep. If God thought we were garbage, he would be content to leave us where we are. But he loves us so much more than that.

The practice of confession, whether confession with a priest or simply confessing our sins to God, seems to have gotten a bad wrap. The critique goes that such practices have us operate out of a place of unhealthy guilt and shame. But confession and the receiving of God's forgiveness are the cure for guilt and shame, not their cause. It is fitting that the liturgy for confession comes right at the beginning of the services in our prayerbook for healing. Confession brings wholeness. Repentance is stepping into health.

Imagine you are one of the money changers in the Temple that day. Say that you hear the words of Jesus as he drives you out of the Temple and it causes you to return to the Scriptures and reevaluate what the Temple is for, who it is that you ought to honor. An event like that can turn a life around.

While we trudge through the messy middle of Lent and we encounter those parts of ourselves that remind us all too well that we are in need of deliverance, let's lean into the loving arms of Jesus. Lean into his healing correction. Lean into his loving

discipline. Find the healing that will get you through to say with Paul, “Thanks be to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We have an answer for the messy middle, for the problem of death. Turn to him and be saved!