

Life is Messy

Psalm 119:1-7

1 Corinthians 3:1-9 (NRSV)

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The first 7 verses of Psalm 119 make it sound like we can keep the law all on our own, but we know that is simply not true.

We know that life is messy, and that we are not always spiritual people. We can focus our prayer 'that our ways may be steadfast in keeping God's statutes'. But we will not meet that goal daily, but we can keep the prayer a daily goal.

We know that life is more than messy. It hurts sometimes. We know that we can be wishing it were different, but we cannot change the pain of living life as it is. We can seek to deny how it is and be fearful or ambitious or grasping. We can cry for things to go back the way they were. We may be hurt when things are not as we expect. We can seek to drown out the pain with alcohol or opioids, but that will not change reality.

Recently a blogpost by Joshua Becker – about how he was affected by an article he read - clarified some of the issues that I think are prevalent in our culture. He writes: *“Not only do Americans use more opioids than anyone else in the world, we are prescribed about six times as many of the pain-relieving drugs per capita as the citizens of Portugal and France. And almost twice as many opioids as the second highest nation on the list.*

Equally alarming, Americans consume more than 99 percent of the world's supply of hydrocodone. More than [33,000 people](#) died of opioid overdoses in the United States last year—more than gun homicides by an almost 3 to 1 margin.

This is, indeed, a significant problem.

Keith Humphreys, the author of the piece in The Washington Post, is a professor of psychiatry at Stanford University. As part of the story, he sought to understand why America would lead the world in this troubling category. It's not, as he begins, because we are aging. Other nations have older populations than the US. There must be other economic, political, and cultural factors at play.

This is where it gets really interesting.

One significant reason he identifies for America's addiction to pain-relieving medication is “relative to Europeans, Americans have more faith that life is perfectible (e.g., all pain can be avoided).” He explains:

Consider, for example, a 55-year-old who feels acute back and leg pain after doing the workout that was easy when he was 25. A European in this situation might reflect sadly that aging and physical decay must be accepted

as part of life, but an achy American might demand that his doctor fix what he sees as an avoidable problem by prescribing him opioids.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/03/15/americans-use-far-more-opioids-than-anyone-else-in-the-world/>

In other words, our desire to eliminate all pain from life and experience perfection regardless of circumstance may be contributing to the level of opioid addiction and death in our nation. In this specific case, the need for perfection may be literally killing us. A sober thought.”

Joshua Becker at

<https://www.becomingminimalist.com/perfection/>

We may think we need to never change, and have the body of a 25-year-old, and continue to perfect our house, our jobs, our families and our lives. In essence, to make things perfect. As Becker puts it, *“The search for perfection in our actions often prevents us from trying new things or experimenting with new skills. By its very nature, the desire to commit no mistakes or ever having to admit failure keeps us from attempting new things in life.”*

I Corinthians shows a different truth. Paul speaks to the church of God that is at Corinth and admits that life is messy – that they are messy. Paul understands that people need to grow in faith – that we start out as spiritual babies, needing to be fed slowly and comforted along the way. Though he may get frustrated with people at times, Paul recognizes that the church is made up of people who see their own imperfection. THAT is the starting point. THAT is why we have a prayer of confession each week – to remind us that we have not perfected our faith, or our lives, and that we NEED God.

Paul knows that people, even and perhaps especially church people can yearn for God, but sometimes fall short and judge one another, and behave like humans. Paul teaches the church of God that is in Corinth that even church people differ and disagree and get deeper into conflict than maybe we like to – than maybe we find comfortable, BUT by getting deeper, people also get closer.

That is the message of those loving, messy, conflicted Corinthians. And that was Jesus’ message too.

As author Catherine McNiel puts it:

“Jesus of Nazareth is so entirely one of them they can hardly find anything special about him at all. He fits right in with the messy busyness of everyday life.

And it is here, in their midst, with their routines of fish and wine and bread, that he proclaims the kingdom of heaven.

The gospel, Jesus teaches, is in the yeast, as a woman kneads it with her bare hands into the cool, pungent dough. It is in the soil, so warm and moist when freshly turned by muscular arms and backs. It is in the tiny seeds of mustard and wheat, painstakingly saved and dried from last season’s harvest...

Jesus placed the gospel in these tactile things, with all the grit of life surrounding him, because it is through all this touching, tasting, and smelling that his own sheep- his beloved, hardworking, human flock- know. And it is through these most mundane, touchable, smellable, tasteable pieces of commonplace existence that he shows them, and us, to find God and know him.

Jesus delivered the good news in a rough, messy, hands-on package of donkeys and dusty roads, bleeding women and lepers, water from the well, and wine from the water. Holy work in the world has always been like this: messy, earthy, physical, touchable.”

Catherine McNiel, Long Days of Small Things: Motherhood as a Spiritual Discipline

Life is Messy. But Jesus came to live with us in this messy world – that is the message of the incarnation. Peace is not the absence of trouble – it is the presence of God.

I remember reading a book by Frederick Buechner one summer while I was in college, a book called The Sacred Journey. Buechner’s central message is that God speaks to individuals in their daily lives, through the events that happen to them and that touch them deeply. The meaning of those events is often mysterious, ambiguous, cryptic, when first experienced. In Buechner’s life stories these events did not seem central at the time, it was only later when he recognized these small experiences of life were places where the road of his life turned, and realized these moments as inspired turns in the road that led finally to service to Christ.

This is a theological truth that shone like a beacon in my life that day and since: that small daily events could have eternal importance. That the messiness of life has meaning. To receive that truth changes the way we look at the world, and at our own lives.

I remember how when I read it, I felt moved by it – that religion was not simply something for a Sunday morning or good behavior, but for our whole lives – the messy parts and the wholeness of our experience. That it is not just when we are good and following the rules that we matter to God, but that our whole lives matter.

Our lives matter. Our lives speak the truth of Jesus. Our lives, lived in community – this community or this church group or this world we live in – speak the presence of God into the world.

As Frederick Buechner wrote in The Sacred Journey

“ABOUT TEN years ago I gave a set of lectures at Harvard in which I made the observation that all theology, like all fiction, is at its heart autobiography, and that what a theologian is doing essentially is examining as honestly as he can the rough-and-tumble of his own experience with all its ups and downs, its mysteries and loose ends, and expressing in logical, abstract terms the truths about human life and about God that he believes he has found implicit there. More as a novelist than as a theologian, more concretely than abstractly, I determined to try to describe my own life as evocatively and

candidly as I could in the hope that such glimmers of theological truth as I believed I had glimpsed in it would shine through my description more or less on their own. It seemed to me then, and seems to me still, that if God speaks to us at all in this world, if God speaks anywhere, it is into our personal lives that God speaks.”

In and through our personal lives – God speaks. In the dailyness of our messy lives, God speaks. The question is: are we listening? Do we even pause to see if God is here, much less listen...to the experience that our lives bring to us?