

The Mess We Cannot Get Rid Of – Christ’s Work
The Cat in the Hat Comes Back
Fall Focus – Week 3

I am not very handy, but one thing I can do is paint. The problem is, I seldom “just paint” when I paint.

I may be painting while I deal with laundry, cooking or answering the phone. What that leads to, you may have already guessed, is paint not only in the room I am painting, but paint on the washer, the phone, and the stove. But that isn’t the worst of it, because usually I also end up with a good amount of it in my hair.

Now these days that wouldn’t be so noticeable, but it used to be that I’d get to church on Sunday and some child would point out the streak of blue paint in my hair, which would send me to the bathroom where I would seek to remove it before church began.

It is easy to track things from where they belong to the rest of our lives.

These days, I live in a house with off-white carpet. Whose idea was it to lay off-white carpet in a house where actual people live? The other day I spent a couple of hours trying to get all the stains out of it. I have only lived there for 3 months—how did it get so messed up already? Finally, I finished and felt a great sense of accomplishment, which lasted for about half an hour, when Jacob, Jeff and the dog (and I) walked on it.

Everyone knows about messes and how messes like to spread. It can be paint or dirt messes, but those are the easy ones compared to the messes our lives get to be. As we continue our Fall Focus, we look at the children’s stories of Dr. Seuss alongside our faith stories. Today (week 3), we turn to the story of *The Cat In the Hat Comes Back* and to the messes of life.

Our story today, on one level, is certainly about making a mess. The Cat in the Hat makes one mess—the one in the tub—but that mess quickly spreads to clothing, rugs, and walls, and finally moves outside to the snow. The story is about teamwork as much as it is about trouble, for everywhere the Cat in the Hat goes he brings a team to take care of the mess.

But I think this story is about more than pink snow. It is about those messes in our lives we cannot get rid of. We try, we may even involve others, but to no avail. The mess spreads. What kinds of messes?

For us, they can be lies, mistakes, misunderstandings, deceptions, or bad choices. They can be messes that start with greed, pride, or self-indulgence. It can be the mess we experience because of tragedy that changes our lives. You name it, the messes we create are numerous and they spread. You bet our messes spread and spread.

Do you know one thing that really bugs me? It is the belief that being a person of faith means you have it all together. My experience is that that people of faith are those who really get how little they have it together, what a mess they truly are.

I quoted one of my favorite books these days on this week's blog, but let me share it with you. This is from Shane Claiborne and his book, *The Irresistible Revolution*.

"A few years back, I was talking with a homeless guy in an alley downtown, and he started sharing with me about God. He was familiar with the Bible but kept talking about 'the Christians' in the third person. A little confused, I finally asked him, 'Are you not a Christian?' 'Oh no,' he said, 'I am far too messed up.' I asked him what he thought a Christian is, and he said, 'Someone who's got their stuff together and has things figured out.' I confessed that I must not be a Christian either and that I wasn't sure I had ever met one and we laughed...The gospel is good news for sick people and is disturbing for those who think they've got it all together. Some of us have been told our whole lives that we are wretched, but the gospel reminds us that we are beautiful. Others of us have been told our whole lives that we are beautiful, but the gospel reminds us that we are also wretched. The church is a place where we can stand up and say we are wretched, and everyone will nod and agree and remind us that we are also beautiful."

Scripture is filled with God speaking to us of the big trouble we are in. Oftentimes, we don't want to hear it. It seems when you are in big trouble—then and now—you try even harder to pretend everything is just fine.

I think we do that because we are just so scared. The mess is too big, so *maybe if we pretend, things will go back to normal*, we think. But life can't be lived in denial of who we are, and honestly, all of us are broken and the most broken among us are oftentimes those who think they have it all together.

For me, some of the most moving words about the trouble are in are found in Isaiah 1:13-20. This is *The Message* version, which puts it in very contemporary terms.

13 "Quit your worship charades. I can't stand your trivial religious games: Monthly conferences, weekly Sabbaths, special meetings - meetings, meetings, meetings - I can't stand one more! **14** Meetings for this, meetings for that. I hate them! You've worn me out! I'm sick of your religion, religion, religion, while you go right on sinning. **15** When you put on your next prayer-performance, I'll be looking the other way. No matter how long or loud or often you pray, I'll not be listening. And do you know why? Because you've been tearing people to pieces, and your hands are bloody.

16 Go home and wash up. Clean up your act. Sweep your lives clean of your evildoings so I don't have to look at them any longer. Say no to wrong. **17** Learn to do good. Work for justice. Help the down-and-out. Stand up for the homeless. Go to bat for the defenseless.

Let's Argue This Out **18** "Come. Sit down. Let's argue this out." This is God's Message: "If your sins are blood-red, they'll be snow-white. If they're red like crimson, they'll be like wool. **19** If you'll willingly obey, you'll feast like kings.

20 But if you're willful and stubborn, you'll die like dogs," for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

There can be no doubt that humanity as a whole keeps missing the boat. whether it is religious people who keep busy with meetings instead of meeting needs, or people who turn a blind eye to God altogether. We have created a mess we cannot get rid of, and it is worse than pink snow by quite a bit.

It didn't start out this way. In the beginning it was, *all good*. Genesis, chapter one, tells the story of creation and how good it was. That refrain—it was good—is throughout the text. Let's look at a slide version of this story.

SLIDE SHOW: Genesis 1 (ending with humanity).

So it started off good. But...

In theological terms we refer to this as THE FALL. This means that once things were in harmony between people and God and creation, but then something happened that changed all that.

We often point to the next chapter in Genesis with the story of Adam and Eve and the apple. This is a powerful story about turning from God and seeking to make ourselves the center of it all. This fall from grace, this turning toward sin, is told in numerous ways throughout the scriptures, like our Isaiah text, which points to the religious people of the time doing all the right stuff when they are at worship. They know the hymns and songs, they raise their hands up in praise, and they give financially and serve on committees, but then...? Then, they walk over the homeless person, kick the dog, don't forgive others, and go back to a life uninformed by God's ways.

Another way we talk about this is sin. Sin is that which separates us from God and God's ways. We can also talk about this as brokenness, shame, bondage. However we talk about it, it is a feeling—a knowing—that things aren't right, and no matter how good, smart, and hardworking we are, it just isn't going to take care of it.

But, of course, we try, especially if we are smart, if we have resources, or if we'd been able to pull it together before. But unfortunately, most all of us will come to the point in our lives where we see that we aren't *all that*.

Do we need Little Cat Z? Don't we need Voom? Yes, in our own way we do. We need someone who comes in who takes our brokenness and holds us until it slowly starts to heal; someone who takes the shame that weighs us down with all we couldn't fix and lifts it from our shoulders; someone who takes the chains that keep us in bondage—bondage to others' opinions, to our past, to an addiction—and breaks them. We cannot do this for ourselves. We need help.

This is what we understand Jesus to be: the help we really need; the one we cannot do without. Jesus, God in human form, Emmanuel, the Christ, the one in whom we encounter the most real God, this Jesus comes among us and, without Little Cat Z and without even Voom, he gives us the priceless gift of freedom and new life.

He does this through his teachings, through his living, through his death, and through his resurrection. And through a relationship with him, we find—maybe slowly, maybe quickly—that the mess we have created and lived in for so long doesn't have the

final say on our lives. Do you hear that? Whatever you are living with right now doesn't have the final say on your life if Christ is your Lord.

In the movie, "Signs", Mel Gibson plays Graham Hess, a man whose wife has died. Graham, who is clergy, has walked away from everything connected to his faith in God. So when crop circles appear on the farm on which he is living along with his children and brother, he assumes it is a stunt. But as crop circles continue to appear, his faith—or lack of it—is tested.

In this clip he is discussing with his younger brother the two kinds of people there are in this life.

CLIP: *Signs*, 5 minutes

One of the most basic and important questions with which you will ever wrestle is, *Is there hope?*

Is there hope in the midst of depression, in a time of death and loss, in the midst of a broken marriage, as you lay awake wondering if you can pay the bills. You will wonder if there is hope when you stand next to your parent as they suffer, as you work all day and come home to be a single parent to your child, as you struggle to find your identity in a world that teaches us that what you have matters supremely.

Is there hope for us, hope that is other than a pretense wrapped in *affirming your good* or pretending that some day it has to work out? Because you know, lots of times things don't get fixed on this side of eternity—you and I know it, we see it around us, we read it in the paper. We know that a magic wand cannot be waved so that all will be well.

Christian hope is different than the hope found in the world. It is a hope rooted not in what I can do, because even our intellect and our resources go just so far. Instead, our hope is rooted in God. And our God isn't some distant, faraway, removed from our life God. Our God has been made real to us in God's great love and mercy for us all.

Nowhere is this more seen than in Jesus Christ, who was both God and Human. In his divinity, he took on humanity and lived as we do—knowing the same pain as we know.

But it is more than this, for he also places us as part of a community where we can travel together, looking to him as our source and finding brothers and sisters that pick us up as we struggle.

It is easy—oh so easy—to get discouraged, to falter, to give up. We all hide under the bed some days. But for us on the journey of faith, whether we are at the start of the journey, just returning to that journey, have gotten lost on a cul-de-sac, or are way down the road somewhere, we have other choices.

I believe that we do have hope: hope as we stand in the midst of our brokenness; hope as we suffer under the powers of shame and bondage; hope as we stand at the grave; hope as we suffer due to another dead-end choice.

I believe that there is a God who meets us in Jesus Christ, and that through him we may have new life. I believe this not because I read it in a book. I believe this because I have experienced it and I have seen others experience it too.

This gives me hope in the midst of hard times in life, in the midst of my own bondage, shame, sin and brokenness, and it draws me to prayer and to worship.

I have hope that we can be healed of many things this side of life, and that these sins do not separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, neither here in this life or in the life to come. How can I deepen the hope within me? How can you and I grow in hope? Here are a couple suggestions:

First, don't isolate yourself—connect with others. We need each other. You cannot get through the things in your life without others, especially without other people of faith. So, connect with people in your church. I know it is hard. I know you are shy and would feel weird asking for someone's phone number. I know you are busy. God created us to carry each other.

Second, connect with God. Worship each week. You have to do this. It will plant deep seeds of hope in your life (and in your kids' and youth's lives). God is real; getting this will keep you hanging on.

Third, renew yourself as part of your life. This week, my suggestion is to take the sheet in your 24/7 and read these verses on hope. Let them seep into you. Mull them over. Write them on Post-Its[®] and put them all over the house.

Let me close by reading a scripture that lifts up the hope that informs my vision for today and eternally. This is Rev. 21: 1-5a, NRSV

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. **2** And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; **4** he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." **5** And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Let us pray.