

JESUS AND OUR MESS

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

David B. Keller
October 4, 2009

TEXT: Hebrews 2:8-9 “As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death.”

PURPOSE: To urge us to shift our attention from the trials and troubles of our lives to focus on Jesus, who has shared our common lot and shows us how to remain faithful in the midst of trouble.

Here’s something you didn’t need to come to church to hear:

Jesus Christ does not appear to be in charge of the world as we know it.

The world as we know it appears to be mired in mess after mess.

We become numb to the news of violence

that is the daily bread of far too many people on this planet.

But then, there is an incident like the killing of the Amish children this past week, and we wake up and say, ‘my God, what is this world coming to?’

Stories of adults in responsible positions—

clergy, teachers, counselors, and politicians—

behaving in sexually irresponsible or abusing ways toward children and youth are part of the ugly background noise of life in our society.

But when we stop to think about a real person doing really perverse things, we wonder how people can get so messed up.

Whatever your opinion of the war in Afghanistan,

we are at least united in our awareness that the situation is extremely complicated, shall we say, messy.

Next Saturday, members of our congregation

will join many other people in this community,

and thousands of people of faith across the nation in our annual CROP Walk. CROP raises funds to fight hunger and alleviate suffering

both locally and around the world.

But when we pause to ponder the plight of refugees, of victims of disasters, of people living in permanent poverty, it's more than any compassionate person can bear.

Like I said, our world is one mess after another, mess piled on mess, a place that seems far removed from the reign of Jesus Christ.

Come closer to home. Many of our personal and family lives, to a greater or lesser extent, appear to be more disordered, more messy, than they appear to be ordered by Christ's rule and way.

Someone is churning inside because of hurt that goes way back or stress that's happening right now.

Someone's bills keep coming, and someone's debt keeps increasing.

Someone's homework or job work is always hanging over someone's head.

Someone's job is a pain in the neck, and someone's else's job is in jeopardy.

Someone's health is in crisis,

and someone else's health insurance is not helping their situation.

Conflicts between parents and children are tearing someone up,

and distress in someone's marriage is wearing someone else down.

Someone is abusing alcohol, while someone else is suffering the consequences of a loved ones drinking or drug use.

I hope no one here today is more than one of these 'someone's', because even a couple of messes like these coming at the same time can overwhelm the best of us with a feeling of helplessness.

For many of us, thank God,

life's blessings more often than not outweigh life's stresses,

and we generally enjoy a sense of peace and plenty in our lives.

But never forget that somebody is here today, as somebody is on every Sunday, who can't think of anything but her mess, who is drowning in it, who can't sing the songs, who can't hear the living word of God, and who sure can't see Jesus.

Take today's Gospel passage, in which Jesus condemns capricious divorce, and then goes on to say that remarriage amounts to adultery.

Divorce is as much of a mess as any of us will face.

Many divorced and divorcing people hear this text, and think of themselves as the objects of his disdain rather than receivers of his support.

They worry that they might not be worthy even to set foot in his house, with the net result that their lives get more isolated, and therefore more messy.

The truth is that Jesus was as troubled by divorce as anyone is, but his desire always has been to walk with us through the messes of our lives.

But when our world is falling apart on the inside and the outside, it's hard to see Jesus, to believe he sympathizes with us, and to focus attention on him rather than getting lost in our mess.

The Letter to the Hebrews, which we began to hear together in worship today, says that, "we don't see everything in subjection to Jesus, but we do see Jesus."

We could put it this way: "We see a messy world, we live messy lives.

The whole mess surely couldn't have anyone with power for good in charge.

But we catch a glimpse of the one who came to take charge of this world, the one who we believe has power to establish order over every mess.

We see wrong on the throne, truth on the scaffold, but we also see Jesus, keeping watch among his own.

We see reason after reason for cynicism, for building walls,
for taking what I need without thought of the needs of others,
but we also see Jesus, who gave his life that we might really live,
and that casts everything else in a totally different light.”

We don't see Jesus sitting at God's right hand, majestically reigning over his realm.

Rather, we see Jesus as one who knows what it's like to be up to his ears in a mess.

What else but a mess was that last week of his life,
a week marked with betrayal, abandonment, self-serving injustice and conniving,
and finally, cruel suffering and horrible death?

Someday, all things will indeed be subject to Jesus.

Someday, all the world's messes will be swept away,
and our loving, forgiving, welcoming Savior
will establish his reign of justice and peace.

But today – today does not appear to be that glorious day.

Today is another one of those days
when we feel that we've got to pay attention to the messes we're dealing with,
or for sure, they will just get messier.

So how shall we see Jesus today? Here's a picture of how.

Many years ago, I attended a seminar, sponsored by our national denomination,
exploring how churches can experience renewal through creative and daring ministry.

The seminar group took a field trip to Camden, New Jersey,
a city which, at that time, had a reputation
for being one of the most decayed, crime-ridden, poverty stricken cities in our nation.

Our bus took us through neighborhoods ravaged by the cancer of urban decay.

It was depressing just to look out the window.

But then we stopped in front of a little stone church building.

Even from the outside, we could see that this had been,
but no longer was, a house of worship.

A big sign hung over the door,
identifying this as the home of the New Visions Community Services.

Inside, there was a job counseling center,
showers, washing machines, and a food pantry.

The old worship space was filled with racks of used clothing.

A desk and file cabinets inhabited the former place of the altar and pulpit.

The director of the New Visions, a remarkably buoyant woman named Carol Riley,
took us on a tour of the place and told us stories of her clients.

I was deeply impressed not only by the effectiveness of the work,
but more with Carol's strong character and victorious attitude.

The heartache and injustice surrounding her is as messy as it gets in our country,
but Carol was not lost in the mess.

Without wearing her faith on her sleeve,
it was mighty clear that it was her faith that kept her committed and hopeful.

New Visions had installed a drop ceiling in the old sanctuary
to cut the cost of heating the space.

The large painting of Jesus on the wall behind where the altar used to be
now was cut in half by the new ceiling,
so all we saw of him was his feet and lower legs.

With a desk and file cabinets crowding out what little was visible of that painting,
it made for a strangely incongruous scene.

It turned out that the old choir loft and organ were in the balcony of the old sanctuary,

up a flight of stairs and above the new drop ceiling.

Paul Sadler, the man from the UCC who was leading the seminar, climbed the steps while we were listening to Carol tell stories downstairs and cranked up the old organ.

A fair number of us followed the sound of the music.

What we found up there was a balcony turned into a very messy storage area, and a view from above of an insulated drop ceiling, attached by wires to the beams of the original ceiling.

On the far wall, beyond the clutter of the boxes, and through the tangle of those wires, was the top half of the painting of Jesus.

From that back choir loft, we now could see that this was a picture of Christ in glory, risen from death, ascending into heaven, his hands raised to bless the creation over which he reigns.

How do we see Jesus? In life, as in the New Visions Community Center, we often don't get to see as much of him as we wish we could.

But that doesn't mean that he isn't all there, totally present in the messes of our lives and of our world.

How do we see Jesus?

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote that, (Hebrews 2:10-11)

“It was fitting that God, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father.”

In other words, God knew that the only savior we would trust to clean up our messes is one who has experienced the messiness, the suffering, of the human condition.

So we see Jesus, not exempted from our troubles, but in our troubles.

We meet him in the emergency room and in the soup kitchen,
in the hall outside our teenager's slammed door.

He looks over our shoulder while we're paying our bills.

He sits with us when we drink alone.

He walks with us when we storm out of the house to escape the heat of an argument.

He watches the evening news with us.

Thank God, he stands with the people in Darfur, in Iraq, in Gaza,
and he walks with those incredibly vulnerable people
trying to cross our country's southern border.

Wherever there is suffering, distress, mess piled on mess,
we meet Jesus, wearing what Mother Teresa called "his distressing disguise."

How else do we see Jesus?

Sometimes, the only way to get a glimpse of him is to come to church.

The sight of Jesus has the power to bring hope to any situation.

The sight of Jesus assures us that we are not alone,
that one who can lead us through the messes of our lives is walking with us.

The sight of Jesus gives us reason to remain faithful,
to keep on keeping on, no matter what trials or troubles may be dragging us down.

Without a doubt, we do not see all things in subjection to him.

We see frayed relationships looking for healing.

We see piled up work that wearies us just by thinking about it.

We see people here and around the world
who have no hope but for the simple caring of people like us.
We see his church, imperfect but growing in his Spirit,
a place where things rarely work out as they should,
but nonetheless, a place where we can find him through the singing of his songs,
and see him in the faces of his friends.

We see all the mess of this messed-up world,
but because we also see Jesus, we are not lost in the mess.
The one before whom every knee will someday bend,
before whom every power will someday bow,
is coming alongside us in the midst of whatever mess may be ours,
bringing strength and serenity, courage and comfort,
and offering himself as the right focus for our vision.

See Jesus. See him with you, wherever you are, in whatever mess may be messing you up.

See him with those brothers and sisters of ours around the world
who are trapped in messes beyond our imagining.

And then, take notice of how seeing him changes the way that everything else looks.