

November 10, 2019

Finding Trouble: Getting Honest About Addictions

Matthew 25:31-45, John 3:16-17

Janet Young

Executive Director of Church-wide and Children's Ministries

For the past several weeks, we have been looking at the ways we can get into “good trouble” with God. We’ve seen that often we are reluctant to follow God’s leading into places of trouble. Most of the previous sermons in this series have made me squirm. I know that I have lots of reasons/excuses for my anxiety. I don’t want to be uncomfortable. I think I’m not hearing God correctly. Maybe someone else will do it. One of my main reasons for not seeking good trouble is that it will expose my own weaknesses. To seek good trouble is to be vulnerable, and that’s just not fun. The Wednesday morning women’s group just completed Priscilla Shirer’s study on Gideon. Gideon was definitely in a weak position. Even before God pruned his army down to 300, the Israelites were gravely outnumbered. Priscilla Shirer broke it down like this: “Overwhelming situations like these are often God’s way of doing business. The Bible is filled with stories of people who got to see their weakness parlayed into a demonstration of Yahweh’s strength.” She also says, “...our weaknesses are the conduits through which we experience God’s strength.” (p. 70, 71 of Gideon study guide by Priscilla Shirer)

To find “good trouble”, we have to acknowledge the overwhelming situations in our lives. That’s why today’s topic is so difficult. The struggle with addiction is overwhelming. It has impacted or is impacting many of us in this room. It impacts our families, our communities, our nation, and the world. So, before I begin, I would like to ask you to pray with me.

Prayer

I want to start by making three things very clear. First, I have found my own “good trouble” with this topic. Pastor Tom offered to let me preach the sermon on kids. How easy would that have been? But of course, I do have to add my two cents to his sermon. I often have people tell me that they are “not cool” enough to hang out with kids. One Sunday, I was having that conversation with someone in the hallway. I told them what I always tell people. I am not cool. BUT the kids know I love and care about them and that’s all that matters. One of our middle schoolers was walking by so I asked him, “Am I cool?” After he recovered from his bout of laughter, he confirmed that I am definitely not “cool”. But then I asked, “But do you know that I care about you?” This time, no laughter, only an “Yeah, you care a lot.”

Yes, that would have been a very easy sermon for me to preach, but in my heart, I felt that I was being led to the topic of addiction. Because “caring a lot” is an important piece of recovery from addiction as well. It’s important to talk about how we, as followers of Jesus, should respond to addiction. I found trouble preparing for this message. Part of the trouble is that addiction has so many facets. There are political implications. There are social implications. There are certainly social justice implications. And of course, there is a role for the church to play. In looking at all those aspects, I’ve learned some things. And I’d be glad to discuss any of them with any of you. But that leads me to the second thing I want to be very clear on: I am in no way an expert on addiction. I’m going to repeat that: I am not an expert. This topic spoke to my heart because I, like many of you, have seen the effects of addiction in my own family. On both

sides of our family, there are people struggling... people that I am very fond of. And that's why my heart breaks for those who have addictions and for the people who are supporting them. And the only reason I am up here today is to hopefully give some insight on what we can do to support and love those who are in this battle. And finally, I want to be perfectly clear on this, addiction is a mental illness. If you hear only one thing today, hear this. Substance abuse disorder is a mental illness that changes normal desires and priorities, interfering with the ability to work, go to school, and to have good relationships with family and friends. Often, there is an underlying mental or physical problem that contributes to the addiction. In spite of a changed attitude in the medical community, addiction still often leads to condemnation in our society. If we are to help people with addiction recover, we have to stop blaming them and those around them as being "weak" or "bad".

So, that leads me to the first way that we can love and support those with addictions and those who love them. Let's keep judgement, blame and shame to ourselves. Let's just start with the families. Trust me, the families of those addicted often blame themselves. They often feel confusion, anger, stress and guilt. That's why one of the things that family members hear in Al-Anon are the three C's.

- We didn't cause it – it is not our fault that the other person drinks, it is their private battle
- We can't control it – we have no power over the other person's desire to drink
- We can't cure it – it is an illness that cannot be cured through any known medical remedies (<https://www.al-anon-sc.org/the-family-disease-of-alcoholism.html>)

The families of addicts bear enough burden. We don't need to add to it.

And we don't need to add to the burden of the addict either. Shame only contributes to addiction. If the addict feels that they are going to be judged, they will only want to disconnect more from the people around them. Too often, we assume that we know the whole story. We don't. And we never can. There is a great quote that makes the rounds on social media regularly. "Don't judge my story by the chapter you walked in on." Every time I see it, it makes me stop and think, "Whose story am I judging today?" If I truly want to love others as God intended me to do, judgement, blame and especially shame need to go out the window. As Christians, we love to quote John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." But the verse that follows is equally important. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." As Christ's representatives on earth, our goal should be to show His saving grace to those around us, not to condemn them.

A few weeks ago, Jason spoke about some "dangerous" prayers. One of those prayers was "send me", and he used Jonah as an example. Jonah's response was "Nope, not going" and he headed in the opposite direction. But why was this his response? Because Jonah was judging the Ninevites. In his mind, they couldn't possibly be capable of repentance. They weren't worthy of redemption in his eyes. And if we're being honest, Jonah wanted to see them punished. But in God's eyes, things looked a little different. As a follower of Jesus, I need to remember that. *We* need to remember that. Our vision is not God's vision. God did not send His Son to condemn the world, but to save it. So, no blaming, no shaming, no condemnation...not of the addict or of their families. And if that's all you can do, that's a great first step.

But if you want to take a dangerous, vulnerable, step further into “good trouble”, take the step to connect. Addiction is often an attempt to dis-connect from the world, from people who make us uncomfortable, from situations we don’t want to deal with, from physical or mental pain that we want to escape. You might have noticed that I’m using the words “we” and “us”. Why? Because in reality, we all have our addictions. That’s why it’s hard. Addiction runs through the heart of all of us. I’d like you ask yourself: “What am I addicted to?” Shopping? Social media? Gambling? Exercise? Pornography? Food? Netflix? Weed? Video games? Fantasy football? Alcohol? Busyness? Does that busyness include Bible study? Ministry? Too much time at work? Or perhaps you’re addicted to your image – making sure that your mask is firmly in place.

Have I named your addiction yet? I’ve named at least one of mine. I love nothing more than to veg out in front of the TV and binge on Netflix. I don’t have to think, or talk to anybody, I can just be numb. And I can do that for hours. So, what is your addiction? I’m actually going to give you a few moments to think about it. Now, I’m going to ask you to practice some vulnerability. If you, a family member or someone you know has struggled with any kind of addiction in the past or is struggling now, I’d like you to raise your hand. As I listed some addictions, you may have heard yours and you might have thought that nobody would get it. But you saw the hands that were raised. You are not alone. And this is not a new problem. In a recent sermon at Menlo Church, John Ortberg said the name of addiction has just changed. In the Old Testament, it’s called “idolatry”. So, whether you call it an “addiction” or an “idol”, keep yours in mind as we look at Matthew 25: the parable of the sheep and the goats.

When we teach Bible stories to children, we often tell them to put themselves into the story, to choose a character and put themselves in their shoes. For this parable, I think we like to put ourselves in the shoes of the righteous. And that’s okay. I am glad that this is a church who actively looks for the “least of these”. But we also need to put ourselves in the shoes of the “least of these”. Do we ever acknowledge that perhaps we are the ones who need to be seen?

It’s an interesting parallel that this passage is in Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew – who was an outcast “least of these” tax collector – until Jesus called his name. Even then, people questioned Jesus’ judgment in eating with tax collectors and sinners. The New Living Translation calls them “scum”. In The Message, they’re “riff-raff”. But what was Jesus’ response? “Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.” (Mark 2:17)

So, I ask you again. Have you ever been one of the “least of these”? Have you ever needed someone to feed you? Maybe not literally, but have you ever been hungry for human connection? For just someone to talk to or to even just acknowledge that you exist? Do you ever thirst for a drop of kindness from those around you? Surely, there’s been a time in your life when you’ve felt like a stranger, looking for just one person to welcome you. Naked? Maybe not physically, but remember those vulnerabilities I was talking about? I know there have been times when I’ve felt pretty exposed. Sick? That’s an easy one. We’ve all been there, whether with a serious illness or the common cold. Prison? Think about that idol you have. Doesn’t it sometimes feel it has you in chains? We all have prisons of our own making.

Can you picture it? Have you put on the “least of these” shoes? When you’re feeling like the least of these, what is the thing that you crave the most? Someone to notice you, someone to care, someone to connect, someone to erase the lines and cross over to the other side. If you missed TJ Dickerson’s sermon on October 20, I highly encourage you to find it on-line or pick up the transcript. He shared a great picture of how Jesus calls us to connect, no matter what the circumstances.

When we’re dealing with substance abuse, however, that can be a hard place. It’s a sad reality that families sometimes have to disconnect from their loved one for their own safety or mental well-being. That’s where we can come in. We can connect. But let me be clear – connection does not mean we support the addiction. It doesn’t mean enabling. It simply means that I take a step to acknowledge that the person with addiction is a human being.

When I take the time to connect, I’m not connecting with a statistic. I’m connecting with a quirky, messy, unique person. I’m looking someone in the eye, maybe buying them coffee, or taking the scary step of asking how I can help. I’m acknowledging that I don’t know their whole story. That’s being vulnerable. It sometimes feels overwhelming. And it’s hard! I have to admit that I don’t have answers. I can’t fix anything. But I can be present. I can say things like “I love you. I don’t want you to feel alone.”

Ecclesiastes 4:10-12 reminds us “If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer.”

Today, I am mostly asking you to take the step to connect with someone that you see struggling. Be that person who is standing “back to back” with another person. But as we all realized earlier, sometimes we’re the ones who need to be seen. It’s okay to ask for help! It’s okay to seek someone out to connect with you. That might be one person, it might be a 12-step group, it might be Al-Anon. We have a PAL (Parents of Addicted Loved Ones) group that meets here every Thursday night. Take a step past your vulnerabilities and simply connect.

I’m not saying that connection is a cure, but it is a way to alleviate the isolation that always accompanies addiction. Connection requires compassion. For that, Jesus has to be my guide. The Emotionally Healthy Spirituality course has helped me to see more clearly that being in close connection to God will help me better connect with people. Pete Scazzero calls it “practicing the presence of people”.

Scazzero writes, “As emotionally mature Christian adults, we recognize that loving well is the essence of true spirituality. This requires we experience connection with God, with ourselves, and with other people. (2nd slide) God invites us to practice his presence in our daily lives. At the same time, he invites us ‘to practice the presence of people’, within an awareness of his presence in our daily relationships. (3rd slide) Jesus’ profound, contemplative prayer life with his Father resulted in a contemplative presence with people. . . . This ability to really listen and pay attention to people was at the very heart of his mission. It could not help but move him to compassion.” (Emotionally Healthy Spirituality, p. 170)

Being moved to compassion. Is this the answer to the tragedy of addiction? It's a good start but it's not the cure. Then, what is the answer? This is where I have to admit that I don't know. This is what I do know:

First – I can't shame, blame or condemn. That doesn't help, and in fact may actually worsen someone's addiction as they further disconnect and isolate themselves from the people around them.

Second – I have to recognize my own addictions. It's only as I am vulnerable that I can truly have empathy for others. Or I may see my own need to ask for help.

Third – If I take the step to connect, I need to practice the "presence of people". This will bring me closer to the heart of compassion. It will bring me closer to the heart of Jesus.

And for me, this is what it looks like. This is a picture of some art that hangs in my office. Some of you have seen it. Some of you have asked about it. It's called "Easter Eggs". It was created by someone in my family – someone who is an addict, someone who has been through multiple recoveries and relapses. Someone who has been excluded by friends and family more than once because of his addiction. He is also one of the most loving, creative, funny, and generous people I know. He would give you the shirt off his back and if you needed another one, he'd find one for you. "Easter Eggs" reminds me of three things every time I look at it. First, it reminds me to pray for my family member and for the family members who are walking through the seasons of recovery with him. It reminds me to pray for all of those who are dealing with this disease. Second, I am always aware that the eggs are broken. Beautiful, multi-faceted, and colorful, but still broken. As am I. As are you. Jason reminded us of another dangerous prayer: "search me and know me". He reminded us that it is much easier to point out the failings of others, forgetting that we are equally broken. Yes, broken. But there is beauty in that brokenness because most importantly, when I look at my "Easter Eggs", I remember Easter. Easter...when we remember the sacrifice Jesus made for all of us.

Resurrection and redemption are available to all of us. I remember "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." Because of Easter, because of Jesus who was sent by His Father to walk with us as a human being, sent to save the whole, broken world. Not to condemn, but to save. To save all of us broken, beautiful, multi-faceted, colorful "least of these" people.