

LIVING ON MISSION WTH GOD
Embracing the Mess
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I began our “Living on Mission with God,” sermon series by emphasizing that **Collaborating with God is a great way to satisfy our God-designed need for meaning and purpose...and while that’s true, it doesn’t mean partnering with God is always fun and easy.** As I was planning this series I contacted 30 people from McBIC and asked if they’d be willing to answer 3 questions about what it looks like for them to partner with God in their lives. The responses I received were excellent and I used those responses to help shape the sermon series and to identify people we could feature in the video we showed during last week’s service, but the first response I received wasn’t one I expected. One of the respondents wrote,

I know this isn’t the answer you were looking for, but I think we do people a disservice when we give the impression that partnering with God means that every interaction will result in changed lives and blessing. Then, when someone does step into the messiness of the world and they meet with the slightest bit of difficulty or resistance, they quit because they feel like they’ve failed.

I wasn’t looking for that, but it’s a great point. So good that I’ve titled today’s sermon, “Embracing the Mess.” It is important for us to understand that living on mission with God isn’t a picnic. Our world is messy and engaging with people who are hurting and broken means we’re going to step waist deep into that mess as we seek to communicate Jesus’ love with them.

Encountering messiness shouldn’t surprise us. After all, Jesus, the one we look to as our model, lived anything but a carefree life. Toward the end of his three years of ministry with his disciples Jesus began to be much more open about the difficulties that lay ahead. His disciples struggled to accept what he told them. At one point Jesus explained that He was going to Jerusalem and when He arrived there He would suffer at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders and eventually they would kill Him. When Jesus’ disciple, Peter, heard this he took Jesus aside and rebuked Him—telling Him it was going to be this way. Jesus responded to Peter with the words, “*Get behind me, Satan!*” (He wasn’t accusing Peter of being the devil; He was rebuking the enemy’s temptation to look for an easier way out.) Then Jesus spoke these words,

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will

it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? Matthew 16:24-26

On his way to Gethsemane, where He was crucified, Jesus literally took up his cross and He told his disciples in the passage I just read that any follower of his must be willing to “*take up their cross.*” Much of the time our lives are pretty comfortable, but as we follow Jesus we will encounter difficulty and hardship in our lives and in the lives of those we seek to minister to.

During the time I was receiving the responses to my questions about missional living, Greta and I went to the Youth Center on a Sunday night in August to hear our senior high teens and leaders share about their experiences ministering to the homeless population in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco on their July missions trip. As I listened to the teens and leaders share I heard again about ministering for God in the midst of life’s messiness. I’ve asked two teens from our San Francisco Missions Team and Cindy King—the person who I referred to earlier—to come and share what embracing the mess means for them.

Interview with Cindy King & 2 Teens from the San Francisco team—Grace Bond & Todd Feil

Cindy, last week in the video we watched in our service your husband, John, mentioned that you wanted to adopt 20+ special needs kids into your family. Can you tell us briefly the journey God has had you and John and your family on since you were married?

Teens, can you give us a brief overview of your senior high missions trip to San Francisco this summer--who you worked with and what kinds of things you did in San Francisco?

Cindy, your family’s investment in the children you’ve adopted is commendable and I’m sure it has been rewarding, but it has not been without its challenges. Can you summarize what it has meant for you and your family to “carry your cross?”

Teens, I know you had a lot of fun on your trip and you learned a lot, but there were also hard parts. Can each of you tell us a bit about a messy situation you stepped into on your trip?

It’s exciting and fulfilling and at times it’s fun to partner with God doing his work in our world, but it also has its challenges—the pain and brokenness of the people we interact with; the lack of tangible results; and, coming face to face with our own short-comings and weaknesses aren’t easy. Jesus said it well, “*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*”

In his life and ministry and eventually in his death, Jesus embraced the mess, and so did the Apostle Paul. Throughout his New Testament letters Paul alludes to the hardship he endured as he shared his faith in Christ and planted churches all over the Mediterranean. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 Paul gives a lengthy account of these challenges...

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? 2 Corinthians 11:24-29

Paul's legitimacy as an apostle and the truth of the Gospel was being questioned, so Paul wanted his readers to understand what he had endured in his ministry on behalf of Jesus.

To help us continue to unpack the theme of "embracing the mess" I want us to look at two statements the Apostle Paul made—one of them in his first letter to the Corinthian Church and the other from his second letter to the Church at Corinth. In both places he alludes to a common military practice of that day, which I want to give a bit of background for. When the Romans—the ruling power of Jesus and Paul's day—would conquer a nation there would inevitably be a lot of blood shed and loss of life among the conquered people, but the army would often spare the nations' king, ruling class and some of their wealthy citizens to accompany the Roman army back to Rome for their victory celebration parade. The commanding general would lead the parade into the city, followed by the troops dressed in their finest military regalia. The well-dressed officers, soldiers, horses and chariots and flags made quite a spectacle.



And then at the back of the parade procession would be the conquered people—their king, government officials, leading generals and prominent, wealthy citizens.



The crowds of people would shout and applaud in honor of their military heroes. And then after they had passed would come the captives of war. The crowd would hoot, holler and hiss as they sought to further humiliate these conquered people.

Keep that picture in mind as I read Paul's words from 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 9-13 and then 2 Corinthians chapter 2 verses 14-17.

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well

as to human beings. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment. I Corinthians 4:9-13

Admittedly, this isn't an endearing description that makes us want to jump up and say, *"Count me in, Lord. I want to partner with you."* But Paul is explaining what it's like for him to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. Now, look at what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians chapter 2...

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? 2 Corinthians 2:14-16

Again, Paul references the triumphal military procession with the captives bringing up the rear, but this time he gives us a more hopeful image.

- We spread the aroma of the knowledge of Jesus everywhere we go.
- To those who interact with us, receive our message and our saved, we are the pleasing fragrance of Christ.
- But to those who don't or won't receive our message we're the aroma or the fragrance of death.

There are the two sides of the coin of partnering with God. To those who refuse to receive our message, we smell like death. We remind them of their sin, hurt and brokenness and if they aren't in a place to receive that we probably won't be treated well. We might be criticized, ridiculed, held at arms-length and accused of having improper motives. But to those who are receptive to God's love and grace, we offer hope, joy, peace and life. We get to partner with God in seeing lives transformed—lost people found and those who are spiritually dead brought back to life. To those who are receptive, we're the fragrance of Christ.

To close the message portion of our sermon today I'd like to invite Krista Dollman and Rebecca Kipe to the platform. Krista and Rebecca serve on the leadership team of Peace Promise, a ministry that began at McBIC and has continued to grow. These women and their team embrace the mess of ministry as well as anyone I know.

Interview with Krista Dollman and Rebecca Kipe

Can you give us the “elevator ride summary” of what Peace Promise is and what it does?

Krista & Rebecca, ministering to women in the strip club industry is far from glamorous. Can you share with us a bit about the hard aspects of your ministry?

Krista, your team powerfully models for me of what it means to minister in the mess, but I don't want us to just focus on the hard parts. Can you wrap it up for us by sharing the joy and blessing you experience as you minister to women in extremely challenging situations?

What does it look like for you to embrace the mess in your life?