

## The Mess We're In

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Some of you have heard me tell the story that comes from the annals of being the youngest of four brothers. I just want you to know that there is special place in heaven for the youngest of four brothers. Otherwise known as the little punk brother. This story is of the time when I was about six years old and I was given over to the care of my oldest brother while my parents went out for the night. It's always an experience when you put a little brother into the care of an older brother -- an evening fraught with all sorts of potential -- none of it good. My parents had left my brother, who I think was about a Junior in High School, specific instruction not to leave the house nor to take me anywhere with him. An instruction that he promptly disobeyed. It turned out that he had made plans for a romantic rendezvous with his most recent sweetheart down at the local Jr. High schoolyard. Of course it meant he had to take me, either that or lock me in the broom closet -- an alternative I'm sure he seriously considered. So my brother told me he was taking me down to the George Washington Jr. High playground-- and that if I breathed a word of it to mom or dad --- it would be the last thing I did. So we went. When we got there Trez, my brother, told me to hang out near the playground while he went over there to meet someone. And again, if I left this area it would be the last thing I did. So I hung around the playground while my brother went off for his little interlude. While

hanging around the playground I decided to take my chance on the monkey bars. And it was during my effort to get across the monkey bars that I fell and I fell on my arm and broke, as I learned later, my wrist. A while later when my brother came back to claim me he found me in tears with a throbbing and quickly swelling wrist. Problem. What's a disobedient Casanova to do? Well, of course, you cover it up. You tell your pain-in-the-neck little brother that it's nothing, it will go away, it will be better in the morning, and if you tell mom or dad anything about this it will be the last thing you do. Home he took me, whimpering. Later he put me to bed with my wrist now the size of a grapefruit and with the assurance it would be perfectly fine in the morning ... and if it wasn't I was to say nothing about the playground, the girlfriend, the monkey bars, or it would be the last thing I did. I fell asleep and woke up the next morning with a watermelon now at the end of my arm. I think I might have tried to put on a long sleeve shirt, but it was to no avail. Mom spotted it ... and for about 90 seconds I played absolutely dumb until her threat over my not telling the truth grew greater than my brother's threat over telling the truth -- then I spilled the beans and was taken 12 hours delayed to the emergency room.

When I think of that story and my brother's "management of events" it makes me think of how easily we can get ourselves into a mess. One thing leads to another, one bad choice leads to another bad choice, one white lie leads to another white lie and you're in a mess. And you're not only in a mess, but you are led to do some stupid things once you've gotten yourself into that mess. Something gets broken and

“Love redeems because love takes on our sin, our hurt, our wounds, our brokenness.”

instead of dealing with the brokenness you put it under the covers and hope it will be all right in the morning.

But there are a lot of things in the world that aren't all right in the morning. There are lots of things in my life and in your life that are not necessarily all right in the morning. The truth is the world is a broken and sinful place. Perhaps it is better to say that we are a broken and sinful people. And no matter how many covers we try to put over that and no matter how much we may want to try to sleep it off -- the human condition is the human condition -- "we sin and fall short of the glory of God," the apostle says. We get ourselves into the mess of brokenness. We fail to live up to what we could live up to.

Will Willimon, former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University tells the story of going to give a lecture at a large church in Houston, Texas and it was to be a lecture on sin. And he was to give it in, of all places, a room in the church called "The Human Potential Room". Dr. Willimon commented on the particularly irony of delivering this lecture in a room called "The Human Potential Room" and went on to note that if there were any Calvinists in the room, they might have been eager to halt the lecture and say, "We know about human potential -- it's called sin."

The truth is if we were honest with ourselves we would say that if we have any potential, you and I, it is the potential to sin. To get ourselves in a mess, to break and to be broken, and to not be able to cover it up.

It is one of the great delusions of our lives, isn't it? To break, to sin, to hurt, to deceive, to be wounded and to be broken and to think we can cover it up. Living in a place like Sarasota -- a place we call paradise, ("just another day in paradise," we say) can tempt us to do our best to make it look like we have our act together. A scroll through Facebook and Instagram and everybody is having the time of their lives and not a care in the world. Everybody has their stuff together. No one is posting about the job they lost, or the virus they contracted, or the friendship that was lost, or the F they got in geometry. No, it's all good. And boy that means I better do something to make it look like my life is the same way. It's all good!

But it's not the truth is it? It's not all good. We may pull the covers up and put on a happy face but it's not all right in the morning.

Don't get me wrong. We live in a beautiful world. I'm Mr. Optimism. I prefer to call the glass half full. But that doesn't mean, of course, that it isn't half empty. There's a gap. The beautiful world has its pain, its hurt, its brokenness. It's made its

way to your home, I'm sure. And that means you are an official member of the human race. And if the good news of the gospel is going to make any sense for us – it has to take this reality into account. No philosophy makes sense if it does not take seriously the mess we're in.

“We proclaim,” wrote the apostle Paul, “Christ crucified.” We proclaim that God came into the human world and the human world does what it always wants to do – it breaks, it wounds, it hurts and in the end it crucifies. God doesn't say, Put on a happy face. No, God puts on his own unhappy face and shows us how real God is. And not just how real God is – but because God is love – how real love is. Love enters the mess. Love redeems because love takes on our sin, our hurt, our wounds, our brokenness. Love lives in the mess, and shares the mess. Love gets messy. Love lets its own heart be broken along with everybody else's. This is the power of the cross. This is redemption. The lamb of God who takes upon himself the sin of the world. And this is love, wrote another apostle, not that we loved God but because God loved us. And he sent his son to live in the mess. Some serious love.

Thomas Cahill is a favorite historian of mine. He's written some provocative and popular histories of the rise of Western Civilization. He wrote years ago an article wherein he described a ministry that his church performs – and it is a ministry to care for children who are victims of AIDS. And he tells of how he and his friends from St. Malachy's Church in New York make it their regular pilgrimage to go to, of all places, Incarnation Children's Center, and they do whatever they can to care for these children. They hold them, they play with them, they read

to them – whatever the child most wants from another human being that's what they do. They go there because these children are victims of a messy world. An imperfect world. A broken world. These kids didn't sign up for the mess, it got handed to them. And they got stuck in it. And Cahill chronicles his journey with one little boy that he calls Everett. And how for a time when he visits he just reads to Everett – and Everett only likes a certain kind of book ... so that's what Cahill reads. And every week the boy gets sicker and sicker until finally it doesn't make any more sense to read. The only thing it makes sense to do is to hold. Just hold that little boy. Just hold him. He just holds him until finally little Everett stops breathing. Love gets messy. Love gets serious.

And that's what we see when we see Jesus hanging on the cross. Some serious messy love. We see what the messy world can do. We see the sin, the hurt, the wounds. But that's not all we see. We see God with skin on. We see some serious love. We see love that takes your life and my life really seriously. We see redemptive love.

And I suppose that's what makes this meal so different. No other table talks of flesh and blood. Can you get any more real than that? Any more serious? Flesh and blood. Body broken, blood spilled. It may be grape juice and gluten-free bread to our taste – but to our soul this is some serious love. Because if the world is going to make any sense for us, if God is going to make any sense for us – it's got to be messy. It's got to be broken. It's got to sit us in love's lap and hold us and rock us and take on our broken souls and redeem us. It's got to say to this messy world – “Father forgive them for they don't even know

how messed up they are.” Cover it up but it won't be better in the morning. And without waiting for us to do anything about it – love just loves. Love redeems. Love holds on. And there's nothing else that makes any more sense than that



# The Mess We're In

---

*Dr. Stephen D. McConnell*  
**September 4, 2016**

---

  
Church of the Palms

© 2016 Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323