

Lenten Sermon Series: From wRecked to Restored-“From Clutter to Clever”

John 2:13-22; Exodus 20: 1-17; Psalm 19:1-6, 14

Salem United Methodist Church

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Do you have or do you know anyone who has a perfect life, free of problems, challenges, stress, or struggles? A person may have a life that appears perfect, but their inner thoughts or inner life may include some material, emotional, or spiritual clutter or even chaos. We are not perfect and neither is the world. We know firsthand that there are areas in our world that does not have perfect weather! And we know firsthand that there are areas in our world that are in chaos both politically and/or religiously. In this Lenten Sermon Series, we will be journeying to the cross with Jesus as we examine how “wRecked” our lives and world can be, and how God sent Jesus to save or restore us and the world. What Wondrous Love is This!

I have to confess something. I hate chaos and clutter. Both leave me unsettled. When things are unorganized I become unfocused and frazzled. When clutter begins to take over my life, I have to stop and organize the clutter or triage the clutter as to what I need to keep and what needs to be given away, or trashed. When life gets out of control, the first thing I do is discern what steps need to be taken to create order out of the chaos, and then put those steps into action so life can be restored. I have learned in my years in the ministry that creating order out of chaos is a gift given by God who is the God of Order. The creation story is an example how God created the universe in an orderly fashion from absolutely nothing. Having order is important to our existence. The United Methodist Church holds order in high esteem, too. Elders are ordained to Order which is defined as, to organize the church for ministry! Imagine life in the church if there were no rules or no one in charge to see that these rules are put into place. Imagine life in the world if there were no rules. The Israelites were experiencing life with no rules after they crossed the Red Sea. When they were slaves in Egypt, they didn't need rules. The Egyptians told them what to do and when to do it. When the Israelites became free, free to think, free to do whatever they want, God realized that they needed order in their lives, rules to live by, a set of boundaries to create order out of what could have been utter chaos. So God gave Moses what we call the Ten Commandments. Actually, the Bible calls them God's Words. Before I get into these Words, I have a joke.

Moses comes down off the mountain with the two tablets in his arms and announces, “I've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is: there is only ten of them. The bad news is: we can't call them to the “Ten Suggestions.” No matter if we call them the Ten Commandments or Ten Words, God organized these ten in an orderly fashion. Have you noticed? This is another example of God being the God of Order. The first four commandments focus on our relationship with God. The last six focus on our relationship with others. The first four focus on making God a priority in our lives. If we follow these four, they will help us create order in our lives by keeping the last six. We will begin with looking at the first word of God in Exodus 20? God calls us to remember what God has done for us. For the Egyptians, God gave them their freedom. For us, we are called to look back over our lives no matter what our age is and see where God's grace has brought us. When we reflect on our lives with this intention and gratitude, we will not be tempted to create other gods and worship them. When we reflect on God's presence in our lives, we know that God is a great God, is always there for us, and stands with us and for us. When we discover or rediscover this, there is no need to create or worship other gods. However, we are human and we do. We make something else our focus rather than God. We put something else between us and God. We create the clutter and/or chaos in our lives that keeps us from making God a priority. Our clutter and even the chaos becomes a god. As we focus on our clutter rather than God we are led to be disobedient to the remaining six. What is the clutter in our lives that becomes a priority? I will dive into five different types: informational, material, political, emotional, and spiritual clutter.

First, we will look at the information clutter of our email inbox, our Facebook and twitter feeds, the “must read” blogs, the 24 hour news feed, the “must see” YouTube videos, movies, and TV shows, etc. Before we get too far into information clutter, I have another joke about God giving Moses the Ten Commandments. As God finishes instructing Moses, God says, “And post these on Facebook requesting that all your friends share with all their friends to see how quickly it can go viral. Oh, wait, I'm getting ahead of myself.” These various media can be a great way to find needed information and share pertinent information, but we can spend huge amounts of time cluttering our minds and souls with useless information about the opinions of others and their actions. When we check our

computers, phones, and other electronic devices more often in a day than we check in with God, we have created an idol. The information clutter takes our focus off God, and before you know it we begin to forget about the rest of the commandments, especially those directed to doing no harm to others. Through technology we can neglect the needs of our family. We can covet what we do not have. We see what others have and we want it. If we have the skills, we can steal another's information or create a virus which can screw up not only someone's day, but their lives. We can dishonor others by slamming them anonymously. Because we don't have to identify ourselves, we think we have the freedom to say the most unkind, hateful things about and to each other. Because there is no accountability, we can anonymously make up lies and not get caught. And through technology the temptation is there to commit adultery, and even find ways to commit murder.

Second is the material clutter in our homes. There are all types of information on how to de-clutter one's home. In fact, there is a whole industry built on creating order out of the chaos from our material clutter. How do we get so much stuff in our homes? Because we continue to buy more than we need. We purchase things because, "We just have to have it!" We spend so much time and money on buying what we don't need, in part because we have to have what everyone else has, or shopping fills an emptiness within us. When I asked leaders of this congregation to suggest a focus for this Lenten sermon series, I was told that we need to hear that our materialism gets in the way of our relationship with God. When our focus becomes the acquisition of more than we need and managing all that we have, then our material clutter has become an idol. Do not conform to this world, but be transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ. Clean house. Jesus cleaned out the Temple of its clutter of extortion. They sold animals for sacrifice at high prices and exchanged the Roman money for temple money at a high cost. If Jesus can clean out their clutter, Jesus can clean out ours. Here's a suggestion. Give away what you don't need to our ASP Yard Sale in April. One of the spiritual disciplines we can choose to practice during Lent is not to purchase anything we do not need, and instead give the money we would have spent to a mission, such as ASP or another mission of your choice.

Third is the political clutter which could be categorized with the informational clutter, I suppose. The airways and internet are filled with political banter that can unsettle the most Christ centered person. When we listen to or participate in the political chatter that tears down, demeans, and seeks to destroy, we are murdering the very character of our nation. One of the spiritual disciplines we can practice during Lent is to refrain from participating in this kind of chatter. Instead, pray for a political concern and/or a politician that you are tempted to bash. And be open to what God will do through your prayers. Remember, Jesus came into this world to save it, not to condemn it. If Jesus does not condemn, we shouldn't condemn either, but seek ways to save our nation and the world.

Fourth is emotional clutter which can include past and/or present voices that bounce around one's head, voices that tear down and criticize, voices that are difficult to turn off. When we allow these voices to clutter up our minds and hearts, we live in pain. Often we try to quiet them with food, alcohol, drugs, shopping, etc. In doing so, we do not rid ourselves of the clutter but coat the clutter with a stickiness that is very difficult to be cleaned or discarded. Sometimes we allow these voices to vomit out of our mouths so we can purposefully hurt others. If we hurt we want others to hurt, too. One way to create order out of this clutter is to find a trained person, like a counselor or therapist, with whom one can share in confidence. This person can help us identify our clutter and package it up so it can be discarded. In conjunction with this, pray for God to intercede, for God's grace to forgive, and transform the negativity into productive and constructive behavior.

Fifth is the spiritual clutter of our temples, our souls. They become the depository for all the clutter in our lives. We shove them into the shadows thinking they are hidden from us and others. But nothing is hidden from Jesus. He is the Light of the World and shines light onto what we try to hide in the shadows. Sometimes we are embarrassed about it. Sometimes we are guilty. Sometimes we are in denial. While other times we may be defensive. But none of these reactions negates the fact that the clutter is there. The Good News is. The hope lies in the fact that God is also a very clever or wise God. God has a plan to de-clutter our souls and our world, to save us. That plan is to send us our Savior, Jesus. His journey to the cross is the plan. The plan is to offer his life as a sacrifice, as a means to de-clutter or clean up our lives, as an act of forgiveness. In so doing God is clever enough, but more importantly powerful enough to change us, to restore us into a newness beyond our expectations. The journey to the cross is a journey of de-cluttering or purification. As the choir sings, "Purify My Heart," ask yourself, "What kind of clutter do I have in my life? What is my focus?" And then pray for Jesus to de-clutter, purify, and restore your heart anew.

Resources: *A World Worth Saving* by George Hovaness Donigian

