Slide One: Title Slide—It Gets Messy (Acts 15:36-41, 2 Tim. 4:11)

Thank-you to Nestor. [Other introductory remarks.] The thematic thread of this morning’s gathering came about a couple of weeks ago when Nestor and I had an impromptu conversation in my office. I’m grateful for his willingness to share a bit of his story this morning. We take risks when we take on some ministries, and when we get involved in peoples’ lives. Sometimes it gets messy.

The two boys that you see on the screen were part of a team of teenagers who participated in an Impact Virginia camp some twelve or thirteen years ago. (Man . . . that means they would be approaching thirty-years old today. Good grief!) We were working on restoring a lodge so that it could be used for youth conferences and retreats. These two boys were asked to clean out the big stone fireplace. Their first response was, “Eww!” And this is what they looked like two hours later. Look at the grins on their faces!

Sometimes, we need to get messy.

So, you aren’t going to hear me preach this morning. Over the last several months, you’ve heard some great expository sermons. And rather than try to emulate that, I am more inclined to simply share a few things that are on my heart today.

Slide Two: So don’t expect any hot-button topics or controversial

opinions. At least . . . not today.

Slide Three: The thing that is most prevalent on my heart and mind these

days is this transition we are in as a church family. The 2020 Vision for our faith community is very exciting. But we’re now working within a new structure—a new way of making decisions, discerning God’s will, finding our passions, and getting things done. Now I certainly don’t imagine that any of you have had any trouble finding your way. You all are good, right? No questions? No confusion? (Yeah . . . right . . .)

Isn’t that the way it is a lot of times in this life we live. Something looks really good on paper, or it sounds amazing when you get that first sales pitch for something new and innovative and transforming. Then you start plugging in all of those new ideas and . . . it starts to get messy.

Slide Four: So what I thought we’d do this morning is just take a really

quick look at the emerging church that is described in the book of Acts. How many of you have heard your pastors and church leaders throughout the years saying, “We are modeling our church after the New Testament Christian Church,” or some variation on that theme? So you would assume that these Christian faith communities in Jerusalem and other areas of Palestine were amazing examples of churches alive and full of God’s spirit and zeal. And you would assume correctly. But . . . don’t assume that there wasn’t a little messiness.

Slide Five: See if this sounds familiar. Under this new covenant of grace

granted through Jesus Christ, these Jewish Christians were suddenly free from the law! All of those rules and guidelines that they had followed all of their lives—how to pray, how to sacrifice their sin offerings, how to stay ceremonially clean, what to eat, what not to eat — these were all rendered obsolete through the blood of Jesus!

Slide Six: Can you imagine how their world was rocked when these new Christians began to realize that they were free from all of these rules and laws? Can you understand how difficult it was for them to fully embrace this?

Slide Seven: The Apostle Peter—a founding father of the Christian church— had to be literally knocked into a deep sleep by God so that, in a dream, he could see a vision of this new order. A white sheet was spread before him laden with food—food that he had never before dared to eat.

This story of Peter’s vision is told in Acts 10, and it’s akin to this—a vision in which someone whispers in your ear, “You know all those terrible things you’ve been told about chocolate. There is new scientific and biological proof that *CHOCOLATE IS GOOD FOR YOU!! YOU CAN EAT ALL THE CHOCOLATE YOU WANT AND YOU WILL ACTUALLY LOSE WEIGHT!! YOUNG PEOPLE, YOU KNOW THOSE GIANT HERSHEY BARS? YOU CAN EAT TWO OF THEM, AND YOU WON’T WAKE UP IN THE MORNING TO DISCOVER YOUR FACE IS ALL BROKEN OUT!*

Slide Eight: Now Peter was in the town of Joppa when this little dream occurred, and he was further encouraged when he traveled to Caesarea and spent some time in the home of a Roman Centurian named Cornelius. By the way—note that I said Roman Centurian. In other words, he wouldn’t make it into Adam Sandler’s “Hannakuh Song.” He’s not a Jew.

Slide Nine: And lest we get too carried away in having a little fun with Peter, let me emphasize how serious this was. This step he took into the home of Cornelius raised the stakes even higher for him and the emerging Christian community. You see, Jewish law forbade them to even *associate* with Gentiles. Peter not only spent time in the home of a Gentile . . . he . . . he ATE with them! HE HAD CHOCOLATE!

Slide Ten: So what kind of reception to you think Peter got when he returned to Jerusalem after this little sojourn? Yeah . . . things got a little messy. Peter had some explaining to do. And to their credit, the Jerusalem Christians heard him out, and they took a few steps further into unchartered territory.

Slide Eleven: But there was another individual on the horizon who was about to rock their world even more furiously. Around the same time that Peter is going through his little period of enlightenment, Saul of Tarsus is in Damascas, and he has been *blinded by the light!* (pause) You all are thinking I’m going to launch into the song, right?

Slide Twelve: The notorious Saul of Tarsus has literally been blinded by the light of Jesus Christ, and he has become a believer. And he has wasted no time, it seems. Within days of his conversion and the restoration of his eyesight, he is preaching in the synagogues.

Slide Thirteen: And of course, it gets messy. Obviously, the Jews who have been fighting this rising movement of Jesus followers are alarmed and dismayed at this turn of events. Saul had been their ally. He had assisted in the persecution of Christians. Now, he had not only joined this Christian movement, he was *preaching* and converting others to become disciples of Jesus.

So they began to plot ways and means to put him to death. Because of this, the Christian disciples wanted to get him out of the city before such a thing could happen. But the Jews were watching the city gates. So . . .

Slide Fourteen: . . . Saul has a somewhat inauspicious close to his first foray into Christian ministry.

Slide Fifteen: At this point he travels to Jerusalem in order to seek out Peter and the other disciples—a logical step for him at this point. But this gets messy, too. For you see, the issues with Saul in these early days after his conversion were not limited to just the Jews. The Christian disciples really didn’t know what to do with this guy. This was Saul of Tarsus. THE Saul of Tarsus. THE “let’s bring all of the Christians bound and in chains back to Jerusalem!” Saul of Tarsus. It was in Jerusalem where they had seen this man assist those who stoned Stephen to death. Many had not even heard that he’d become a disciple—remember, they didn’t have SnapChat and Twitter back then. There weren’t any arguments over which cable news station was fake and which one was real.

Slide Sixteen: Enter one of the most remarkable members of the supporting cast in the book of Acts. Barnabas. Yes, he’s not one of the stars—Peter and Saul (who would become Paul) are the lead actors in the book of Acts. But despite his secondary role, there is no one as important as Barnabas in the formative days of the Christian church. So, let’s talk about Barnabas for a moment. And by the way—after spending much of my life sharing platforms with speakers, and preachers, and teachers, I can pass this truth on to you. Whenever you hear those words “let’s talk about this for a second,” or “let me pause here to say a word about . . .” or something in that vain, it simply means this. We’re fixing to chase a rabbit.

Slide Seventeen: Barnabas. The first time we hear about Barnabas is early in Acts, and it involves an offering that he gave to the Jerusalem Church. (And that’s another thing we can commiserate on relative to this fledgling community of believers. The Jerusalem Church was always strapped for money.) Barnabas quietly sells a piece a land that he owns, and gives the proceeds to the church.

Slide Eighteen: The second mention of Barnabas pertains to this moment when Saul of Tarsus arrives in Jerusalem. If it weren’t for Barnabas, it is difficult to conceive how Saul would eventually breach the walls of that extremely wary group of disciples.

Slide Nineteen: So Saul stays with the disciples in Jerusalem, and . . . it doesn’t take long for things to get messy. Saul just can’t keep his mouth shut.

Slide Twenty: So now it’s the Jerusalem disciples who are saying to themselves, “We’ve got to get this guy out of the city before he gets himself and a whole bunch of us killed.” So Saul is whisked off to Caesarea and then shipped back to Tarsus. And then there is this wonderfully ironic verse that the author of Acts sticks in right here.

Slide Twenty-One: “And then there was peace.” It really does sound like a slam on Saul, even though it may not be intended that way. But it does apply to my point that these individuals who have the potential to greatly impact our world and the kingdom of God also have the potential to create hugely large messes. It’s sort of like that individual in your church that you love, but . . . you’re also really relieved when he doesn’t show up for the quarterly business meeting. Too much drama.

Slide Twenty-Two: So Saul is back in Tarsus. And Barnabas is sent from Jerusalem to assist the blossoming community of Christians at Antioch. And through Barnabas’ encouragement, the church continues to grow. Believing that he needs more help in this endeavor at Antioch, whom do you think Barnabas seeks out?

Slide Twenty-Three: Yes. Saul. This is such an interesting story—the tale of these two men. Barnabas, the son of encouragement, and the one who knows he is taking enormous risks by continuing to invest in this fiery man. And Saul, who is so blindly zealous for this Jesus whose spirit now lives within him that he would continually risk his status and his life.

Slide Twenty-Four: They work together in Antioch for a year. Then they take a trip to Jerusalem in order to deliver offerings from the Antioch church to the Christians in Judea. This is significant for another reason. When they leave Jerusalem to return to Antioch, they have a young tag-a-long. My namesake. John Mark

Slide Twenty-Five: His mother’s name was Mary, and their home in Jerusalem was one of the prominent gathering places for the disciples and the early Christians. He was a cousin of Barnabas, and most Bible scholars believe that he was quite young when Paul and Barnabas took him to Antioch.

Slide Twenty-Six: Now, whether John Mark was prepared for what would happen next, we’ll never know. But when they arrived in Antioch, the church there decides to commission Saul and Barnabas to truly begin taking this message of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. So if John Mark thought he was just going to have a nice little stay in Antioch hanging out with his cousin, he was in for a drastic change of plans. Talk about getting thrown out of the clean world of his mother’s house and into the maelstrom.

Slide Twenty-Seven: And they waste no time in setting off. They travel down to Seleucia, where they sail for their first destination—the island of Cypress. And remember—Barnabas is originally from Cypress. Their first place of ministry is the town of Salamis. And there’s the little tag—and John Mark was with them as their helper.

Slide Twenty- Eight: They continued traveling throughout the island. In the town of Paphos they had a pretty intense encounter with a sorcerer named Bar-Jesus. As Saul attempted to converse and convert people to belief in Christ, this sorcerer continually interrupted him. Saul finally rebuked him—and in the course of his flaming words the sorcerer found himself blinded. (Hmm . . . blinded by the light. I wonder where Saul learned that trick?)

And by this time, the author of the book of Acts is no longer referring to them as Barnabas and Saul. It’s Barnabas and Paul. And Barnabas is increasingly overshadowed as Paul begins to draw more and more attention.

Slide Twenty-Nine: They sailed from the island of Cypress to Perga in Pamphylia. And it is at this point that we have one of the great mysteries of the New Testament. John Mark leaves Paul and Barnabas and sails back to Jerusalem. The author of Acts provides no explanation for why. Therefore it probably behooves us not to speculate on this too much. But . . . just admit it. A lot of you are sitting there at this very moment, conjuring up scenarios and defenses for John Mark. He was young—perhaps he simply got homesick.

Slide Thirty: If you look at the map for this first journey of Paul’s you can see that Perga is his first foray into the mainland of Asia minor. John Mark had lived in Jerusalem all of his life. Cypress was one thing—he and Barnabas had relatives there. But perhaps this leap beyond was just a bridge too far for him. Perhaps Paul’s zealousness in taking the Gospel to the Gentiles was just too much for him. John Mark had been a law abiding Jew all of his life. Perhaps the drama that always seemed to follow Paul around everywhere he went was more than he was ready to handle. Yeah, we can speculate all we want, but there simply isn’t any information to substantiate any of it. We don’t know why John Mark left. What we do know, because of what we learn later, is that this was a big deal for Paul.

So, without John Mark, Paul and Barnabas travel all through Galatia and Lycoania. Lots of cool things happen relative to the growth of the Christian movement.

Slide Thirty-One: But John Mark’s foreboding is also realized as there is a lot of drama and messiness. Paul and Barnabas are chased out of some cities. There are mobs threatening violence and death. In Lystra, Paul is stoned and left for dead outside the walls of the city. Good times!

Slide Thirty-Two: When they return to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas report back to the church. But even in the midst of celebration, this issue of Gentiles becoming Christians hangs over the proceedings like a dark shadow. In fact, as news of Paul’s and Barnabas’ travels reaches Jerusalem, the tensions reach a crisis point.

Slide Thirty-Three: So what do church folks tend to do when an argument needs to be resolved? They organize a convention!! A Church Conference. Yay!!

Slide Thirty-Four: Although some of our church conferences do look more like this.

Slide Thirty-Five: So the result of the conference was a decree—a letter written to all of the Gentile believers in Antioch, Cilicia and Syria. The yoke of the Orthodox Jewish law was lifted, with only a few requirements still retained. And I suppose it would be nice if we could look back and see that this little letter resolved all of the conflicts, and all of the confusion. We know that isn’t the case. [There are divisions within Judaism to this day. There are divisions within Christianity to this day—a thread that runs through our community that still harbors a belief that God withholds his favor on those outside of a chosen race. God demonstrated through Peter and Paul and these New Testament Christians that those days were over. And there is no longer any justification for someone who would deny the worthiness of someone because of their race. *I repeat the words spoken to Peter. “Do not call unclean anything I have declared clean!”]*

Slide Thirty-Six Allow me to wrap this up with one more nugget. After this conference Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, and Paul suggested they return to the towns and cities they had visited on their missionary journey in order to strengthen and encourage the Christian believers.

Slide Thirty-Seven: Barnabas was cool with that, and he suggested they take John Mark with them. Paul was not cool with that. And their disagreement was so strong that they ended up going separate ways—Barnabas took John Mark and went to the island of Cypress while Paul took Silas and traveled to Asia Minor.

They split up. Think of all the iconic partnerships you’ve witnessed splitting up in your life—Simon and Garfunkel, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, etc. This is several notches higher.

Slide Thirty-Eight: Typical of Barnabas—he pleaded John Mark’s case for most of the same reasons he’d pleaded Paul’s case through the years. Sure, there was the potential for more messiness, but great gains for the kingdom were also possible. And I realize history seems to be on the side of Paul here, but I will confess that I sympathize with Barnabas at this juncture more than I do Paul.

Slide Thirty-Nine: For most of us, it is a natural instinct to want to avoid messes. We want to experience life, but we prefer it uncomplicated and simple. We want to have the experience of worshipping God, and serving God, but . . . we try to figure out ways to do it without getting our hands dirty.

Slide Forty: It’s kind of like the person who says he’s been to Mexico City.

Slide Forty-One: In reality, he actually visited the Mexico City exhibit at Disney World’s Epcot Center. He got to do all of the cool stuff—took a little gondola ride, listened to the music and watched the dancers in their colorful costumes—but he didn’t have to speak Spanish, he didn’t have to exchange money, he didn’t have to navigate the streets and figure out how to avoid the seedy sections of the city. (Although some people will insist that there are some really seedy places at Disney World.)

Slide Forty-Two: But this is what we’re looking for in our churches and in our ministries—we want to do our thing for God without having to jump into the mud bath. And, you know . . . you can do that. You can continue to stay on the periphery where you can avoid all of the drama and the messiness. This is the way a lot of people live their lives. Keep life simple. Avoid conflict. Avoid RELATIONSHIPS! Young people, when you find that boy or that girl that you really, really like—if you want to avoid drama and messiness in your life, DON’T START DATING THAT PERSON!

Slide Forty-Three: We have couples in this congregation who have been married

for over a half-century. Have things gotten messy along the way? Certainly. But I dare say that I could ask each one of them if they would do it again, and I would receive an unequivocal “Yes!” You see; if we live our lives avoiding the messes, we miss out on some of the most beautiful things this life has to offer. If we avoid getting involved in our church simply because of the frequent messes that occur, we miss out on those many powerful experiences within the community of faith that bring us closer to God. If we avoid getting involved in ministries, I mean literally getting our hands dirty in the work of God, simply because of all the extra complications, we miss out on the richest of blessings that God bestows on his children. Rather than avoiding the messes of this life—we need to embrace them.

Slide Forty-Four: The last mention of John Mark in the New Testament is at the conclusion of Paul’s second letter to Timothy. Paul is nearing the end of his life. He is in chains, imprisoned in one of the squalid dungeons in Rome as he awaits his final trial. And he asks for Mark. Whatever it was that separated them in the past seems now irrelevant and even forgotten.

Response after Worship: For any of you visiting with us today—if you’re looking for a church home, I’d like to invite you to come and get messy with us.

For those of you who regularly attend our worship gatherings, but otherwise remain content to sit on the periphery, I want you to consider what you’re missing. Yes, it will add complication to your life. Things might get messy. But consider all that you’re missing. Take some risks. Pray over how you can start getting your hands dirty.

For those of you who are struggling with this season of transition and change in our community of faith, remember the monumental changes that the community of faith in Jerusalem faced. Whenever there is a lot of change, there is uncertainty and disorder. That doesn’t mean that the change itself is not a good thing. Trust the VISION! And get involved.

[The New Testament Christian community faced a new world outlook that was nothing short of revolutionary. They had to accept a new vision for not only themselves, but for all humankind. The kingdom of God belongs to EVERYONE, regardless of race and ethnicity. If you are as concerned as I am over the recent prevalence of groups that advocate white supremacy, I invite you to join me at the altar this morning. Regardless of your political allegiances—Republican, Democrat, and everything in between—we need to unite in our understanding of how WRONG this is in the eyes of God, that one race is superior over another. IT IS WRONG! Come and pray with me as we implore God to show us ways and means to communicate God’s true intentions for his people.]