So I’d like to address how death leads to life today. Sometimes it’s so simple. This week I became aware of a campaign by Jim Irsay of the Baltimore Colts to continue to work at overcoming the stigma that surrounds mental illness and specially I think depression. Overcoming is another term for bring about the death of. The stigma surrounding mental illness is that if you reveal that you have a mental illness people look at you in a negative way. It’s like people sort walk around you, aren’t quite as at ease with you as they otherwise would be. The campaign of course is help this stigma die, so that we all live and be healthier and better.

The face of this campaign is a Colts linebacker by the name of Darius Leonard, who has struggled a lot with depression I guess. And because of the stigma surrounding mental illness and depression he avoided getting help. Because in order to get help you have to admit you have a problem. You have to “come out” so to speak. But this stigma around it stops you. It makes people uncomfortable. And so you stay sick or struggle alone because you have to hide your problem or your illness. But Darious and now Jim Irsay are working hard to bring about the death of this stigma, and lift up the problem. Darious of course puts it perfectly. It’s OK, to not be OK. This is the Good News of Gospel of Jesus Christ. It’s OK to not be Ok. That’s what Grace means. And instead of hiding it in shame, you do what? You lift it up. Life it up so people can see. I’m struggling with this problem. That’s how people come together and begin to heal. This is what hope means for our world.

It’s remarkable when you see the story of Jesus play out right before your eyes. The Holy Week story is told perfectly in this little ad campgain. Jesus says, “When I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself”. The little jingle that goes along with this campaign says this, “Everyone hurts sometimes”. That’s what Jesus came to do. To lift that up. Die to the stigma so that people can live. It’s OK, to not be Ok. Why didn’t I think of that. Here’s where I’m messed up, here’s where it’s not workin’ Don’t hide it. Don’t be ahamed of it. Lift it up. At least confess it. This is the path of learning how to live.

It’s easy to say, but sometimes It’s not so easy is it? Those little stigmas are very controlling aren’t they? They don’t die an easy death. They get us in their grip. Our witness to God is thought to be some form of having it all together. Good deeds. The Bible is filled with stories of religious people who thought that this was where God was found. Righteous deeds. These people were called the Pharisees. And one of the distinguishing features of being Pharisee was that if you had problems you were unclean. You needed to be avoided, until you cleaned yourself up. You can’t make this stuff up. That’s a stigma. Problems were a sign of a lack of Godly living.

And this of course can be your faith. So I ask people around the church, how’s it going. “Havent heard of any problems”. That’s the religion of the Pharisees. Problems make you unclean, your better off without them. You’ve heard of clean living. There’s lot’s of people who think that’s what being a Christian is. Makes it hard to “lift it up” doesn’t it? You better believe it.

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remain alone. This is the same thing. That grain of wheat is simply that stigma. Can’t fall apart, and ask for help. So imagine that you are a seed. Nice and tough, everything is just fine. I can handle it. I’ve been this way for quite a while now. No problems here. But then one day you get put in the ground and a little water thrown on you. What happens to the seed? You start falling apart. Oh, oh the seed is trouble. My life is falling apart. The world I know is falling apart. The country is just falling apart. The church is falling apart. Sound familiar Everything is just going to pieces. Oh my this is terrible. I don’t want to be a part of this. The very thing that leads to life, falling apart and needing help, just doesn’t want to die. Jesus is saying today that is is the path of life. This falling apart is where we are lifted up. That’s where we meet God. That’s what the metaphor means. But man, that little stigma about having problems just dies hard. It’s a difficult death.

That’s why Jesus is crucified in the Gospel of John. He came to expose and deal with the sin of his world. But no one wants to be the problem. It’s the stigma. No one wants to fall apart and lift it up and say I have a problem, need some help here. All the Pharisees needed to do was say, “yeah, we’re messed up, we need some help” but they couldn’t do it. They simply could not overcome the stigma. This text today is actually after Palm Sunday which is next week on our calendar. So we’re into Holy Week in this text. But the people don’t get it either. They are all excited about Jesus because they think he’s going to make Isreal great again. They’re just falling all over him, waving Palms who hoo big for the King who is going to restore Isreal to its former greatness. They too think that God is going to keep them from falling apart. So they turn on him too. The only one it falls apart for is Jesus. But out of it came what. Life. As Jesus is lifted up on the cross he overcomes the stigma of hiding the problem.

Someone might say, Pastor Mark, all we lift up today is problems. That’s all we hear about. But I think I would argue that most of the problems that we hear about today are presented as if we could do something about them. As if, if we just tried harder and did the right thing we would be able to overcome them. I heard our current president say recently, “there is nothing we can’t accomplish if just come together”. We’re not getting to what I’m talking about today at all yet for the most part. A little more effort, a little more technology, a little more study, or education. There is no problem we can’t solve. That’s not today lesson at all, this is just the opposite.

When Jesus is lifted up on the cross it’s lifting that we need help. It’s too big. I can’t fix this. We can’t solve this on our own. Need some help here. We can’t. This is why these little stigmas are so difficult to deal with. They come from a view point that says “there’s nothing that I can’t do”. I should be able to handle anything that comes my way. God never gives me more than I can handle. That’s probably the a big source of the stigma right there right. Independence. Self sufficiency. That’s hard to break through or let go of. It’s hard for that to die. We’re the never give up never say die people right?

Well that works for somethings. Works if you are playing football. But when it comes to sin, it doesn’t work. Because the way sin works, the harder you try to overcome it, the deeper you sink into it. Being stuck in sin, is like being stuck in the mud with your car. The harder you hit the gas, the deeper you go into the hole. Ever done that? I’ve been driving a while now and now when I get stuck now I know it’s better to just stop and get help. But that’s the issue here today right. That’s a hard lesson to learn….but that’s just the way sin is.

 Let me give you an example of how this works for me. It’s not the deepest example perhaps but this really is the dilemma that sin puts us in, and that we need to be able to lift up today. Can’t fix it need some help. I think we would all acknowledge that there is right way and a wrong way to treat our bodies right? And a couple of years ago I had this heart thing happen, because I was under way to much stress. And I realized that I was out of shape and needed to get healthy. And we all know that there’s wrong way to eat and live that’s really hard on our bodies. Everyone pretty much knows what that is I think. And we all know that there is a right way to treat out bodies, to eat right and exercise and get enough sleep. Not rocket science right?

But here is the problem I cannot escape from. Here is where sin comes in. I began to do a lot to try not to do wrong for my body and try to do what is right for it. I’m going to avoid doing the wrong and try to do the right. And I think for many of us, that may be that we think about sin. I’m going to try to avoid the wrong, and try to do the right. And if I do wrong, then Jesus forgives me. Not really. That’s not it. Here’s what sin is about, here is the real dilemma of sin: Here’s the twist. I’ve done a really good job of getting in shape and eating right at least according to what I read. I ride my bike. I exercise every day, do some weights just about every day. And because of those efforts I feel great physically. And I at least according to my own estimation have been extremely successful in doing the right thing. I made the right choices, at avoiding wrong and doing right.

But guess what? Guess what kind of person my success at doing what is right is creating in me? Because I’m doing so well at doing right what happens. Yeah, a little pride kicks in. And then I start looking around sometime at all these people who are so out of shape and their shopping carts are full of junk food that they can barely push around. And I get judgmental. And I start thinking you know: I did it, why can’t they do it? Do you ever hear that from the successful people. I did it, why can’t they? Oh boy. Oh man. It’s starting to get ugly. And then I think about insurance costs and how we might pay a lot less insurance if people took care of themselves better. I get resentful. Then the Pharisee really kicks in. Thank God I’m not like those out of shape people. And if I skip a few days of working out it’s like, Oh no, I’m going to be them. Now you’re ashamed to be out of shape. Here’s the dilemma of sin. You’re at your worst when you are at your very best. Yeah sin is doing the wrong things. But the real sin happens when you doing all the right things. Just can’t help feeling a little superior. No matter what I do, the harder I try, the more effort I put in, the worse it gets. I need help. I can’t get out of it.

So that grain of wheat has to fall apart. You just have to lift it up and say, “I need some help here”. And if the Gospel is right, that’s where the healing begins. You’re beginning to get real. A little more humble. And the next time you start talking about somebody elses sin, you begin to come at it with a little more Grace. And the world, as messed up as it is begins to become a little better place. And your glad that you fell apart a little bit. That something brought you to that place where you need help. Because you began to learn what it means to be loved and how to be with people in a way that leads to life. Dying is living. Amen.

But the Good News happens when we get to where we’re done. We can’t. And since I’m talking about how we all need to lift up where we need help, maybe I can talk about how this works for me. I have no trouble lifting up that at times I struggle with depression. But here’s an issue that I think is deeper and points to what our tradition says we have to come to terms with. Here’s what we really need to lift up and say, “I really need some help here. Here is an example of what we mean when we say we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

It's a silly example, but it still works. I think we all know that when it comes to our bodies that God would want us to take care of them right? There’s a right way to treat our bodies and a wrong way. Everybody knows what’s right and wrong here. Filling your body with junk food and drugs and too much stress and no exercise and overwork just isn’t that good for you. Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and you should care for it.