

July 20, 2025

Rev. Ryan Canaday at Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Durham, NC

“You Are Not Damaged Goods”

You all have been a tremendous host and so much kindness has been given to us. Jill and Pastor Steve, thank you for everything you've done for us this weekend. And I use the word “us” very intentionally because, well, some of you know that I have my 14-year-old daughter Selah with me this weekend. And it's a big deal because do you know I got sober when Selah was two and a half years old, and it is not lost on me that one of the greatest gifts I have received in this life is the ability to be a sober Poppy to all four of our kids.

Yeah, we have four kids. Selah's our oldest one, and you know, when I got sober, I made a commitment to myself. I made a commitment that, look, I can fail at a lot of things in life. I can fail at many roles in life, but one role I don't want to fail in is being their Poppy. And so when I travel and it's work related, I always try to bring one of them with me.

You know, there was a time in my life where it was absolutely baffling to me. I could not figure out for the life of me how to pull out of the church parking lot where I was serving as pastor, and I could not figure out how to turn right to go home instead of turning left to go to the liquor store.

Just baffled me. At that time, I was the drunk pastor. And what started out as an escape in my early 20s, by the age of 30, alcohol had totally taken over my life. And the other baffling thing to me was, in my mind, it was never supposed to be me. See, I grew up in a household with a brother who's three years older than me. And man, he was the one who battled drug and alcohol addiction from an early age. And because of his addiction, I saw the pain and the chaos, the destruction his addiction brought into our family.

This is never gonna be me, that's him. My brother, you know, towards the end of high school, he got clean and sober, stayed clean and sober for about 18 months. Life was good. I was in my first semester at college, and I'll never forget the phone call that I received from my mom. She said, Ryan, you need to come home. Brandon has just been killed in a car accident. He relapsed, and in that relapse, he was killed in that accident. And it took me many years to admit this, to say these words out loud, but he was the drunk driver.

This disease of addiction took him too soon. And I wanna invite y'all to do something brave with me for just a moment. If you're willing, of course, if you have someone in your life that you love that has battled or is currently battling addiction, would you be willing to just stand where you are? If you're not able to stand, you can simply raise up your hand. But would you be willing to stand if you're willing? And before you sit down, just take a moment and look around. Isn't it so easy to believe you're alone?

You're not alone. You're not alone. Do you know, it all came crashing down for me. Life came to the bottom for me on a Monday morning, early in the morning, January 7th, 2013. I will always remember that morning. I was passed out on the couch again. Like I so often was because I drank too much and I was hung over. And it was early Monday morning and my wife was upstairs getting ready for work. I heard her get out of bed and start to get ready. And so I did what I thought was the best thing to do: I pop off the couch to make it look like I have my stuff together.

And I walk towards the kitchen. I pass the kitchen, and I look up to the staircase. And there my wife, Tammy, is standing at the top of the stairs and she was holding an empty bottle of vodka, of bottles hidden all over the house. And this time was different. Because she was standing with this kind of brokenness and tears and coming down her cheeks. And I'll never forget the words she said to me while holding this empty bottle. She said, “Ryan, what are we gonna do?”

What are we gonna do? And she might've spoken those words to me a thousand different times. But something on this morning, I heard that word, "we," and all of a sudden I knew I wasn't alone. But the problem was I was filled with so much shame. And do you know the voice of shame? It said to me, the voice of shame says, Ryan, how'd you get here? How did it get this bad, man? You were raised in the church. You've got a biblical studies degree. You've been to seminary, Master of Divinity degree, you are a pastor. How did it get to this?

And I can tell y'all, I tried so many times. I tried everything I could think of to try to stop drinking on my own. And nothing worked. Nothing worked. I went right back to it. And I can't tell you all why on that day, January 7th, 2013, I was totally done. There was a great mystery. I can't tell you exactly how I encountered the G.O.D., the Gift of Desperation. And on that day, I threw myself into a 12-step recovery program. And since that day, I have not put any alcohol or any other mind-altering substances into my body.

Thanks be to God. And see, God did for me what I could never do for myself. God keeps doing for me what I could never do for myself. And do you know, the first thing I did, I started meeting with a sponsor. I knew I needed help. I started meeting with a sponsor and going to meetings. And in my first 30 days of recovery, I'll never forget it, he said something so offensive to me. I was sitting at his kitchen table and sitting across from him and he said, "Ryan, you have to understand something." He says, "you are spiritually disconnected."

And I thought, no, no, no, no, no. Terry, your problem is you just don't know me yet. You gotta get to know me. Don't tell me I'm spiritually disconnected. I've got a Biblical Studies degree, a Master of Divinity degree. I'm a pastor. Don't tell me I'm disconnected because see, if I'm spiritually disconnected, then what do I have? I have nothing. And the fear that came with that, the shame that filled me with those words...and listen, y'all, I get it. You might not be able to relate to all my experiences. But I would ask you, can you relate to my feelings?

Can you relate to that feeling of shame? Brene Brown, anyone read Brene Brown? Brene Brown, she's an author and researcher on shame, talks a lot about shame. She describes it this way. She says, shame is an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging. And that was totally my story. That was me. I could preach about love and belonging, you're worthy of it, but it just wasn't for me. Here's the other thing I know about shame. Shame will always try to convince you that you are somehow damaged goods.

You see, in my work and recovery, I had to spend the first few years working through my shame. But today, my work and recovery, I now get to help others work through their shame. I was three years sober, three years into my recovery. My greatest hope was, my greatest prayer was that you would never find out. Yeah, it was my greatest secret. No one's ever gonna find out I was the drunk pastor. No one's ever gonna find out I battled addiction. No one's gonna find out I'm in recovery. I was three years in and with the help of my sponsor and some trusted mentors in my life, I, uh, decided to go public with my story from the pulpit on a Sunday morning at all three worship services.

And it was one of the scariest things I ever did. My hands were sweating. My, my stomach was turning. And I shared my story of being an alcoholic in recovery, being a pastor into my great surprise that that congregation, they were so gracious with me, met me with all kinds of love and grace. But the greater surprise was on that Monday morning, because on that Monday morning, I checked my email and my email box was flooded from people in the community. They were saying things to me like, I too battle the bottle.

How'd you put it down? They were saying things to me like, uh, my mom or dad struggles with pills. It's destroying the family. What do we do? Or it's my son or daughter or my aunt, uncle, cousin, whoever it was. And so I get to the church the following Sunday, and I look out to my people, look out to the sea of people. And I thought, oh my goodness, we have a huge problem. Because the problem is, you are sitting next to someone, you've been sitting next to them for years, and they're going through the same thing that you are going through, but you don't know it.

Why? Because shame has silenced the voice of the suffering. Two years after that experience, Tammy, my wife and I, and by the way, we just celebrated 20 years of marriage in May. And that is a great gift in my life. Two years after

this experience, we just opened up our backyard on Saturday nights. I was still serving full-time as a pastor at the current church where I was. We opened up our backyard on Saturday nights, and we started FREE Recovery Community. We said, anyone who wants to come and be a part of a conversation around God and recovery and addiction and the spiritual, you're welcome to the backyard.

And who were the people that came? They were addicts, people like me, and loved ones of addicts, people like my wife, and spiritual refugees. And you said, what the heck is a spiritual refugee? Well, we define them as those who've been kicked around by religion. They've been told somewhere along the way that they don't belong. They don't belong in the church. And long story short, that little gathering, well, it started to grow and it took off and things happened very quickly. And a longer story short, today we're in a 12,000 square foot building that we get to call home.

Today we have over 50 recovery meetings and gatherings that happen in our space each and every week. Today we have a fully functioning cafe and coffee shop that's open 9:00 AM to 9:00 PM to create safe space for those who need it most, for those who are barely hanging on. And our mission is very simple. Our mission is breaking the silence of addiction while creating space for healing, recovery and spiritual connection. And our tagline is very simple as well. We shout it out together every single Saturday night, our services are on Saturday nights, 5:00 PM and 7:00 PM. We shout these four words out together:

We don't do shame.

Because we know that shame kills.

And I should tell you a word about my people. They're not church people. You wouldn't walk into this group of people and they don't look like church people, many of them. You're gonna see tattoos on any given Saturday night, you're gonna hear some f-bombs. My people, they don't have much Bible knowledge. My people, they don't know much about theology. Many of them have been wounded by the church or they have been wounded by religion. And yet, I look out of my people and I see the kingdom of God.

I think this is the people Jesus would be hanging out with. I should tell you more about my people. They are the most authentic people you will ever encounter. They don't have time for church masks. The ones we try to put on to make ourselves look better to pretty things up. When they discover healing in their life, they become the best kinds of wounded healers in the world. And they are familiar with shame. And I think the question becomes not just for our community, but for every community.

How do we begin to break down those barriers of shame? Fredo and his girlfriend, they had been coming to FREE every single week for well over a year. And then six months go by and I don't see Fredo. Where's Fredo? Where the heck is he? Well, just recently I was walking into FREE on a Saturday afternoon, and I walked into the big room, churches call it sanctuaries. We call it a big room. We shift language. And I look back in the back and there's someone sitting on the couch. We have couches in the big room to make it feel more like home.

And it's Fredo. And I look over Fredo and he's got his head down in his hands and he looks distraught. And I walk up to him, I said, Fredo, dude, it's good to see you, man. I'm so glad you're here. And he looks up at me and he says, pastor, we were using in a hotel together. And man, I, I left for just five minutes. Five minutes is all I was gone. I walked down the hallway to go to the vending machine to get something to drink. And when I came back, man, I tried everything I could do to save her. I gave her Narcan. I tried CPR. Nothing worked. She was already gone.

His girlfriend died of a fentanyl overdose. It is an epidemic that has plagued our community. It has plagued every community here in the U.S. In fact, last year alone, we lost over 107,000 people to an opiate overdose, most of which was directly due to fentanyl.

Fredo goes on to tell me how unworthy he is, how God must hate him. I see shame just oozing out of his body. And at the end of the night, in services that night, I announced that we'd be doing baptism soon and if you were interested in baptism to come talk to me after the service.

And at the end of the night, Fredo comes up to me, he says, pastor, I would like to be baptized here. Will you baptize me? So a couple months later, we did baptisms. And at FREE we do baptisms in a custom-built wagon. We fill that thing up with water, and there's a whole story behind the wagon, I can tell you another time. But we fill it up with water and we do complete dunkings in our community, very important for our people. And at each baptism I ask a set of questions. I always end with this question: "do you confess that you are not damaged goods and that you are beloved child of God?"

And that night, Fredo, he was the first one out of 20 plus people, the first one in the wagon. And he's sitting in this kind of chilly water. He's holding on and he is got his daughter next to him, and his daughter is holding his hand and, and touching the wagon. And I asked Fredo that question. I said, do you confess that you are not damaged goods? And tears just start to roll down his face. And I'm proud to tell you today that Fredo is eight months clean and sober.

Fredo is a peer recovery coach. He gives back to the community in very profound ways that every Saturday night he comes to FREE with his daughter. And it is one of the greatest joys I get in pastoring free. I get to see moms and dads getting their kids back. I get to see families coming back together, lives being restored. And see, on most days, I'm convinced that my job as a pastor is really simple. Not always easy, but simple. My job is to constantly remind people who they are.

The spiritual teacher, Rob Bell, he wrote a great book called *What is the Bible?* I highly recommend that book. He puts it this way. We'll throw it on screen for you. He says, if you start with instructions and commands, people might be mistaken into thinking that God loves us because of what we do or how religious or moral or good we are. That's not gospel. Gospel is the announcement of who God insists you are. You're a child of God, not because of how great you are, but because God has all kinds of kids and you are one of them. And if you keep telling people who they are, who their best selves are, if you keep reminding them at their, uh, reminding them of their true identity, there's a good chance they'll figure out what to do.

Remind them who they are. They figured out what to do. I'm at my best as a pastor when I simply remind people who they are. And maybe you need this simple reminder this morning too, that the things you've done or the things done to you, maybe these things happened when you were a little boy, a little girl, five years old. The things you've been through, you are not damaged goods. Now you might have to look back at that little five-year-old you and learn how to extend grace to that. You, you might have to learn how to love that you, because the truth is you are good.

You are very good. That's where the story starts. I mean, isn't it interesting that if you go all the way back to Genesis, the very first book of the Hebrew Bible, one of the Old Testament, it starts with a creation poem. And in this creation poem, Genesis chapter one, you have creation being split up in six days. And after each day things are created, God stands back and says, man, this is good. This is good. And then this strange thing happens on the sixth day: God creates humans in God's image.

But God doesn't just say, this is good. God stands back and says something different. God says this: you are supremely good. Now, the Hebrew word here for good. One of my favorite Hebrew words. TOV in the Hebrew. And it literally translates as good, beautiful. Working the way it was created to work. Did you know in this opening creation poem, the word TOV is used seven times? Which means, apparently, God's response to humans is, this is really good. You guys--actually we're in North Carolina, Y'ALL--are incredible.

I mean, dang, y'all are just incredible. And that's good news. That's good news. That's gospel. And the good news always brings people back to their fundamental goodness. And you say, yeah, but wait a minute, pastor. I mean, can we stray from our fundamental goodness? Of course we can. It happens all the time. Talk to any addict or alcoholic,

they will tell you about how they strayed, how they made a mess of things a thousand different ways. But the problem becomes, if we stay there and in our community, we have to do a lot of work to separate the person from the addiction.

We're not the addiction. The substance we were pouring in that was just to numb the pain. That just became a coping mechanism to deal with all the feelings in life. We were just using that to numb. But we are not our addiction.

Five weeks ago. I got a call, it was seven o'clock in the morning on a Tuesday. Got a call from dear friends in our community, John and Carrie. They had been part of FREE almost since the very beginning.

They were calling with this profound grief. And they let me know that they had just found their daughter Tawny, upstairs in her bedroom, dead of a fentanyl overdose. Tawny had also been part of our community from the very beginning. In fact, she was one of the very first ones. I baptized her at FREE. We're gonna do a celebration of life service at FREE next month. And I will remind her family, remind her friends, that she was more than her addiction. She was kind, she was smart, she was funny. She was giving, she was mom to a little girl.

I will remind them that she was not damaged goods. That she was created in God's image, loved from the very beginning and always worthy of belonging. Because you are not the things you've done. You are not the things done to you or all the messages you received along the way that told you you're not good enough or you're not worthy of love and belonging. No, that's start with the story starts. Where does the story start? You are supremely TOV and worthy of love.

Did you know that 65 million adults alive in the US today have already dropped out of religious active religious attendance? They tell us that that number is growing by 2.7 million every single year. As surely most of you know that the church is in decline in America. It has been for many decades. Surely you know, the mainline church, the United Methodist Church is in decline. It's a dying, all sorts of reasons for this. We, we could look at Pew research statistics and read about it. We could read the work of Diana Butler Bass. She does a lot of great work in this area.

And I can tell you what my friends say. My friends say it very simply.

They say, Ryan, it's boring and unrelatable. It's a club for its members and I don't belong there. What if we started with belonging? I mean, what if we started with: "you are not damaged goods, welcome home." And y'all, I believe that this is the way of Jesus. I believe Jesus taught us this way. You might remember there's a parable that Jesus tells. It's in Luke's gospel, chapter 15, one of my favorite parables. A parable is just a short story that always points to God. And Jesus tells us parable about a, a father and two sons.

And if you're a bit fuzzy on the story, let me just briefly recap it. Remember that younger son comes to the father and says, pops, I want my share of the inheritance. Which is a really offensive thing to say. It's like saying, pops, I wish you were dead so I could have the money. The father says, here, take the money. It's yours. The son says, great. He takes the money and he goes off to a foreign land, a distant land, and he squanderers his money on scandalous living and prostitution and probably everything else my community knows all about.

And here's the thing, he squanderers the money. Things get bad enough. He hits a bottom. He's run out of money. He's burned all his relational bridges. There's no more couches to sleep on. And then the text, he says, man, what I would do to go back home. But the voice of shame creeps up. And that voice of shame says, dude, you can't go back home. If you go back home, pops is never gonna take you in. You're not welcome. No, but he's at the bottom. He has no other options. I know what it's like. And so he begins to make the journey back home.

And do you remember the story? The Father, who by the way, represents God in the story. We have all kinds of images for God in the scriptures. This story uses Father God represents the Father, represents God in the story. While he was still a long way off, the Father sees him and goes out and runs to him and greets him with a big bear hug, hugs and kisses. And he says, welcome home my boy. You're home finally. And the sun, because shame is so

strong, the son says, pops, if, if you knew where I was, man, if you knew the things I'd done, you would know that I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.

And the father says, nonsense. We are going to celebrate. He starts shouting to all the neighbors: "quick, get the fattened calf, get the sandals, get the ring, put a ring on it, we're gonna celebrate. And you say, why? Why? Because the son of mine was dead and has come back from life. He was lost and is now found." And they began to celebrate. And do you notice the son didn't do anything to deserve it? Because God's love always moves beyond categories of deserving. I mean, can you imagine God saying you are not damaged goods?

You are TOV and you belong here and you see every parable that was Jesus telling these stories, saying, that's who got us here. You want to know who God is. This is who God is. And Jesus is saying to us, that's what the church could be? Yeah. That's what the church could be.

I'll close with this. Adam has been coming to FREE for a, a long time now. Adam is eight years clean and sober. And Adam is by no means a church guy, if you know what I mean. In fact, if he were to walk in here, many of you would be a bit shocked. You might even have a little bit of fear. Adam's not a church guy. Adam has, uh, tattoos. He has lots of tattoos, way more tattoos than I have. He even has tattoos on his face. He has a skull tattooed on his face. Adam, uh, he has been to prison, spent many years in prison. He's part of a motorcycle club. So he rides a Harley and he wears the leather. And get this, the name of the motorcycle club is called Sober Souls. How cool is that?

Adam is, uh, one of those guys. You probably know people like this. He, he uses the f bomb as if it's a comma. You say, Adam, what'd you have for breakfast? I had eggs, effing bacon, effing sausage. I mean, you probably know people like this. And Adam, if you were to ask my wife, who are the five people you trust most in this community? I promise you Adam's gonna be one of 'em. You know, he recently shared his story at FREE because on Saturday nights, uh, after my message, I have a guest storyteller come up and we do an interview style and they share their experience, strength, and hope.

Adam got on the stage and he, and he talked about his trauma, unspeakable trauma as a child and abuse in his home. He was locked in a closet as a 6-year-old boy, a dark closet for days on end. He spoke about the trauma and abuse. He talked about his prison experience and why he turned to a life of drugs and alcohol to fill the holes. He talked about how he got sober and the things that keep him clean and sober today. And still to this day, he's one of the only ones to ever receive a standing ovation.

I was talking with Adam the week before that. We were meeting my office and we were going through this Saturday night together and I was getting the details of his story. And I said, Adam, dude, tell me, well, why are you here at FREE? Why do you come to FREE?

And he looks up at me, he says, "Pastor, I have done some terrible things in my life. Things that just make me cringe when I think about them. I know you love the scriptures. You love the Bible, but I don't really know much about the Bible and I don't know much about the God stuff. But from day one, when I walked in here, this community told me I belonged here. And they said, this could be my home. And this strange thing is happening, this God that you speak of, I'm actually starting to believe that this God loves me."

He's the first one to come on Saturday nights. He's the first one to come and ask, "how can I be of service tonight?" Because you see, when people get who they are, what they do follows.

And Jesus is saying, this is what the church could be. To create space, to create that space for the most unlikely people, the most undeserving, those with a checkered past and perhaps even a bit of a checkered present. And to proclaim to them: "You are not damaged goods. You are TOV, supremely TOV. You are beloved child of God and you belong here. Welcome home."

Thanks for letting me share this morning. Amen.