
The Kingdom of Heaven is Messy
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Genesis 29:15-28 and Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Our theme over the past couple of weeks has been around how good and evil co-exist in our society, in our churches, and in ourselves. Take last week, when talked about the parable that Jesus told about the wheat and the weeds, and made it clear that when wheat and weeds are growing together, you can't remove the weeds without damaging the wheat so it is better to let them grow together, because they can be separated easily at the harvest. And by extension, good and evil co-exist in our lives, but we can't eliminate evil without damaging the good, so we let them both grow together.

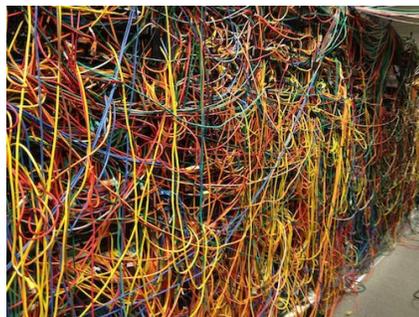
Our readings this week include a passage from Genesis that demonstrates this perfectly. Laban seems like a friendly fellow. He claims Jacob as family and takes him in. He even offers to pay Jacob for his labour. Moreover, he asks Jacob what compensation he wants. That's friendly, right? However, Laban clearly never had any intention of honouring his agreement with Jacob so he rips him off. And how much sympathy should we give to Jacob anyway - this is the same Jacob who lied to his own father in order to steal his brother's birthright. And let's not even get started on how the women in this story are mere chattels - possessions and property to the men. Is this story intended to show good behaviour? I mean - with family like this, who needs enemies?

The story from Genesis offends our modern minds. If this was a TV sitcom, we would be yelling advice at our televisions. We would be telling Laban that he should buck tradition and honour his agreement with Jacob. We would be telling Jacob the he should ask the women if they want to marry him or not. We would yell at the women, telling them to stand up for themselves. Telling them that they might do better on their own than put up with the whims and indifferences of either Laban or Jacob.

In the words of Marci Auld Glass, "From Adam, Eve, and the talking serpent at the beginning, all the way through the dysfunction of Jacob's sons at the end, Genesis is full of family stories that we might like to shove under the proverbial rug. And God is working right through the dirty laundry, betrayal, and trickery to tell the Divine story. We



know this to be true - that God works through highly flawed people and families. We even have it in Scripture. And yet, we continue to argue that only perfect people should lead us. Or we say that God doesn't need this person or that person to serve the church because we have decided that they sin more than the rest of us. Or we decide we will go back to church once we've gotten things figured out.”



Like in most sitcoms, we clearly see the solutions that the characters totally fail to see. And we wonder how they could be so blind. Their problems seem so easy to fix. But perhaps their problems are harder to solve than we imagine. Or more to the point - perhaps solving their problems is harder than simply imagining it. Or - perhaps even life lived properly involves living with some amount of uncertainty and dysfunction. Perhaps even life lived properly involves some amount of “mess”.

So perhaps now is a good time to explain the bulletin cover. Do you know what that's a picture of?

Given that the title is “The Kingdom of God is messy”, you might think it's just a mess. And of course, it is a mess. But what else is it? What if I told you that the picture is a pathway to love. Literally. It's a conduit to relationship, friendship, love, and many

other things. It is in fact the back-side of a large array of telecommunications hardware. That “mess” is the wiring that connects computer hardware together, forming part of a network that connects people together. That “mess” gives us relationships. That mess connects us to life. That mess connects us to love.

Now I know that many of you are not into technology. But the idea of relationship through mess is not a new thing at all. Consider this image. What is this?

Well, this picture is also a mess. It’s a patchwork - a random collection of fabrics that are not the same size or colour, but have been stitched together to create something meaningful. In this case, a pillow. And it is easy to imagine this pillow being assembled in love, and given to someone else as a sign of love. Again, this mess is a mess, but it also builds relationships and love.

Which reminds me of Jesus’s words about the kingdom of God. Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to items that strike us as a bit odd. A mustard seed? Yeast? Notice that the kingdom of heaven is not compared to the object - the mustard seed or the yeast. The kingdom of heaven is actually compared to the object in action. To quote Matthew, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed which a man took and planted in his field.” Or “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into flour.” The kingdom of heaven described in Matthew is not about some final perfect stage or state - it is about an ongoing process, a continuing action. It’s about continuing action towards some new future that cannot be fully mapped out.

Except of course for what Matthew calls “the end of the age”. Whatever he means by that phrase, in his mind it is clearly a time when things actually do get sorted out. A time when the good fish and the bad fish - and presumably people - are ultimately separated. A time when all the details are worked out and we achieve some sort of perfect state.

But prior to that time - everything is in process. Everything is incomplete. Everything is messy. Everything - takes - effort. And yet - somehow - Jesus says that all this messiness is a sign of the kingdom of God - right here and right now. It seems to be a case - as usual - where Jesus tells us that whatever you imagine the kingdom of God is -

that's not it. The kingdom of God, even as present here right now, is never what we imagine the kingdom - or any kingdom - to be.

I'm reminded of the "joke" about the wealthy businessperson who was granted her wish to bring 1 suitcase of "stuff" with her when she went to heaven. And so she found the largest suitcase she could, and filled it with gold, the symbol of her hard work and the reward for which she had spent her whole life. But when she got to heaven St. Peter inspected her suitcase and asked her why - when she had been given permission to bring 1 suitcase to heaven - why she chose to bring pavement with her.

As humans, we are capable of having very strange images of the kingdom of God. If you read the news at all, you know that some of us have an image of the kingdom of God that includes slaughtering hundreds of innocent civilians. Some of us have an image of the kingdom of God that includes rich first-world countries supporting mass murder. Some of us have an image of the kingdom of God that includes sitting in comfort while our elected representatives spill blood on our own hands. I think Jesus was right. Whatever we imagine the kingdom of God is like, it's a far cry from either what we can imagine or what we are creating.

I never know if I should be happy about this or not. On the one hand, the kingdom of God is messy, partial, incomplete, imperfect. On the other hand, the kingdom of God - being imperfect - is in fact something we can all work towards - something we can all participate in. After all, if the kingdom of God is perfect, then you certainly won't see me there.

So - is this the kingdom of God right here? Right now? If so, is this kingdom static - something that we should try to freeze, to preserve? To maintain? Or is the kingdom of God only the kingdom as it moves, changes, grows, transforms? The kingdom is not a place - it is a process, an ongoing process.

The kingdom of God is right here as we change and transform ourselves. The kingdom of God is right here as we embrace justice, wholeness and healing. The kingdom of God is messy, but perhaps that is exactly what makes it real.

Let's all live into the messy and real kingdom of God.

Amen.