

---

The Kingdom of God is Messy  
Fairview United Church and Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
July 26, 2020

by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

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

Last week we talked about how good and evil co-exist in our society, in our churches, and in our hearts. We talked about the parable that Jesus told about the wheat and the weeds, 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. And by extension, that good and evil co-exist in our lives, and we can't eliminate evil without damaging the good, and so the only option is to let them both grow together.

Our readings this week include a fictional story 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 and 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 treated as mere chattels - possessions and property to the men. Is this story intended to show good behaviour? For me, the only thing this story affirms is that famous saying (which I have modified slightly):

[image: with family like this]

With family like this, who needs enemies?

The story from Genesis offends our modern minds. If this was a sitcom on TV, we would be yelling advice at our televisions. We would be telling Laban that he should buck tradition and honour his agreements. We would be telling Jacob that 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 instead of putting up with the childish whims and the immaturity 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 differently 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 problems is harder than simply imagining solutions. Or - perhaps even life lived properly involves living with some amount of uncertainty and dysfunction. Perhaps even life lived properly involves some amount of messiness.

[slide: wiring]

So perhaps now is a good time to explain this image. Do you know what it is?

Given that the title of this reflection is “The Kingdom of God is messy”, you might think it’s 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. That “mess” connects us together as friends and family. That mess connects us to life. That mess connects us to love. And today, because of the pandemic, that “mess” is what enables us to worship together. That “mess” is in fact the back-side of an array of telecommunications hardware. That “mess” is the wiring that connects computer hardware together, forming part of a network that connects people together. If you are participating in this service today, you were only able to do that because of many messes like this that connect us together. Thank God for messes!

That probably feels like a new idea to us. Most of us remember relationships that were built by meeting together, talking, sharing stories. Going to church used to mean dressing up and walking down the street, not staying in our pyjamas and sliding onto the couch. The vast array of messes that allow us to communicate today are relatively new. But the idea that something that is a mess helps build relationships is actually a very old

---

idea. Consider this image. What is this?

[slide: patchwork]

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 case. And it is easy to imagine this pillowcase being assembled in love, and given to someone else as a sign of love. Again, this mess is a mess, but it also can build relationship and be used to share love.

If you don't like messes yourself, just remember that messes can bring life, love and happiness to others. And don't take my word for it. Even my cat knows that a pile of dirty laundry is the ultimate place to feel totally relaxed and at home. And I'm sure that each of us has our own story of how very pedestrian things take on exceptional qualities when - instead of judging them - we simply experience them. For example, think of your favourite comfort food. For most people, their comfort food is made from very basic ingredients, but the ingredients have been assembled with love.

[image: yeast]

Which reminds me of Jesus's words about the kingdom of God. Jesus likens the kingdom of God to items that strike us as a bit pedestrian. A mustard seed? Yeast? Well, not exactly. Notice that the kingdom of heaven is not compared to those objects - the mustard seed or the yeast. The kingdom of heaven is actually compared to those objects in action. To quote Matthew, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed which a farmer took and planted in their field." Or "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a baker 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, requiring only the most basic of materials - and our own efforts. It's about a continuing action towards some new future that cannot be fully mapped out. It's not about the destination, it's about the journey. Like a farmer planting a seed that will - over time, grow. Like a baker mixing in yeast that will - over time - grow. The kingdom of God isn't a destination, it's just the next step in the journey. That's why Jesus said that the kingdom was both here and still coming.

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. Matthew expected that time to be soon, but it still hasn't happened. If it will happen at all, it's in our future.

[image: work in progress]

But prior to that time - everything is in process. Everything is growing. 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 where - as usual - Jesus tells us that whatever we 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 never know if I should be happy about this or not. On the one hand, the kingdom of God is messy, partial, incomplete, imperfect, which is a bit ... disappointing. 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 find me there.

[image: castle]

And how are we to related to this image of the kingdom of God today anyway? For me, the word "kingdom" isn't actually very helpful. When I hear the word "kingdom" I think of something medieval. I think of some arrogant family wielding power using resources they have stolen. I think of a very few people living well at the expense of the vast majority of people. And my image of "kingdom" is that the kingdom is there to protect and preserve the lives of the wealthy and the elite. But surely that's not the type of kingdom that Jesus was thinking about about when he talks about "the kingdom of God"? I don't read biblical Greek, but it really seems like there is some sort of translation problem here.

Jesus suggests a kingdom that is actually sort of the opposite of what I've just described. Jesus describes a kingdom without prestige, or power, or inequality. A kingdom that doesn't even protect itself very well. Perhaps yeast is the perfect metaphor.

---

Yeast leads to exponential growth if it is allowed to grow. But yeast can also be neutralized by salt, a very common material.

[image: you're invited]

The kingdom that Jesus describes is invitational, not powerful. Do you want the type of healing that Jesus offers? Great, come onboard. And if you don't, there is no compulsion to join in. Jesus does not threaten people who are not interested in his mission, he simply moves on to people who need what he has to offer. Jesus seems to have no sense of converting people to his own approach. In medieval times, you bowed to the king or you would be killed. With Jesus, it's nothing like that.

Which is why it's so exciting to be in the church these days. Really! The church in 2020 does not have any real social clout anymore. In the old days, the Moderator of the United Church could request an audience with the Prime Minister of Canada and they would get one. In 1982 there was a riot at the Archambault prison in Quebec that resulted in 5 deaths, and our moderator - responding to a request that went to General Council - was allowed to visit the prison, and with family members, to provide pastoral care and to check on allegations of institutional abuse. That's the sort of societal trust we used to have. That story still gives me goose-bumps. But those days are long gone. Now - in 2020 - the United Church is far less powerful: politically, economically, and numerically.

[image: wires]

And now that the UCC is socially weaker, perhaps we can engage better in the ministry of Jesus. That ministry that is based on being invitational, not powerful. That ministry of bringing what is needed to people with real needs. And here's more good news - in Brantford, we are surrounded by people with real needs.

If success is defined as having power, then our church is not doing very well. But if success is defined as being available to bring life to people who have needs: physical needs, emotional needs, spiritual needs, then we have every chance of being successful. We just need to engage in our own communities, listen deeply, and do what we can to help people - including ourselves - find justice, wholeness, peace, and healing.

Sounds messy, doesn't it? But most things are messy when we look past the facade. We don't need the facade. That facade is fake anyway. It is the messiness of life

---

that is real.

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

*Amen.*