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Dinner At Our House

SHELLY COX

Messy is so unsettling. It distracts us and consumes our time. Whether it's dishes left in the sink overnight, litter by the side of a freeway, or our kids running through the house and knocking over a lamp, we know the tiresome task of trying to manage the mess around us. Few set out to attain a state of messy, but sometimes life just seems to go in that direction.

Even our churches get messy: the brother running the PowerPoint displays the wrong passage of scripture for the responsive reading; the communion juice runs out before everyone has had theirs; or, like at our church, a homeless man comes in during the sermon, walks down the center aisle, sits down on the front pew and mumbles audibly before getting up five minutes later and walking out, only to return a moment later. Such events are not so rare; they are sure to happen in the life of the church.

So, when I was scheduled some months back to lead the communion meditation (my first time for a large congregation), I anticipated the possible messes: not being prepared, becoming tangential in the delivery, offering thoughts irrelevant to this sacred time. In preparation I started to pray weeks before the event, and the Lord faithfully answered. I realized that although the meditation needed to sound conversational in its delivery, I needed to write down every word (even if I didn't say every word) and practice thoroughly. I did these things, and although I was nervous, I felt prepared by the time the morning arrived.

At the ordered time the communion servers and I walked to the front, up the steps to the table and podium. I placed my typed meditation under the microphone and after a deep breath and silent prayer I began to speak:

Dinner at our house is messy. In fact, wherever my kids are, dinner is messy. We were eating with our neighbor a few weeks ago when I looked over at Eliot who had a tall, red plastic cup overturned on his head. 'Look!' he said, 'it's a crown!' One of our sons is so tactile that using a fork is a...

That's when it happened: a mess I did not anticipate interrupted the meditation completely, and I froze.

A visiting man got up from his seat and started walking down the middle aisle toward me. He was obviously very upset. "I've traveled here all the way from Arizona and you are talking about your family during the most sacred time of worship, when you should be talking about Jesus!"

"Jesus is in here," I replied, stunned and a little defensive, but trying to be reassuring. Not reassured, the visitor nonetheless stopped advancing as our preacher and one of our elders calmly walked over to him, while my husband intuitively postured himself to protect and defend me. Our preacher walked the man out to the lobby.

In the seconds that passed I had to make multiple decisions: Do I continue or do I step down? If I step down, who will finish? No one else came prepared. If I continue, do I pick up from where I left off, or do I skip the part about my family and go right into the biblical passage? If I continue, how will I keep my composure? Then, as if these thoughts were intentional prayer, the Lord intervened and my mind returned to the

memory of the morning when the homeless man had joined our worship.

I had wonderful memories of that morning, both of the homeless man and of our church. My husband was preaching. I had witnessed our elders respond obediently to what was undoubtedly the Spirit's leading, and I saw a potentially messy situation become a blessing to all. The homeless man had joined us, then left, then returned to stay until the end of the sermon, most of the time holding a hymnal in his lap. He did nothing threatening; of course he was welcome to stay. As soon as the sermon ended and we began singing, I watched as three of our elders walked over to welcome him with genuine warmth, one putting his arm around the man, another leaning gently toward him and the third elder keeping watch over the flock, our church. I watched as our elders pastored both the homeless man and the congregation at one and the same time.

So there I stood dazed at the podium, my brothers and sisters looking fuzzy and my mind flooded with the memory of my elders' care and of God's powerful presence. I knew it would be okay. I continued the meditation from where I left off:

...is a genuine challenge. And another one of our sons doesn't like his food touching so much that he spends the first few minutes of each meal gently grouping the various parts close together, away from each other. This inevitably leads to messy fingers, which bothers him just as much, so of course he uses his shirt as a napkin. All this takes place amid boisterous conversations (and arguments) about how many levels *Star Trek Voyager* has, what villainous traits characterize their favorite pirates and which of the latest sibling injustices will get the most parental attention.

When I read the story of the Passover dinner in Matthew 26 I don't picture a scene like this. What I picture looks a lot like Leonardo da Vinci's painting of *The Last Supper*. It looks like a meal, yes, but the characters are dressed in beautiful (albeit simple) robes and appear to be staged. The table is set with a bit of organized chaos—plates and cups intentionally misplaced. The men appear to be engaged in casual dining conversation, leaning with heads turned toward one another. All this brings to life a sense of movement and activity in the great masterpiece. Through the centuries, this has developed into an unofficial illustration of the Last Supper we read about in the Bible.

The problem is that the Passover feast in the Bible probably looked a lot more like dinner at my house than it does in da Vinci's painting. Passover was about passing the story of God's redemption to the next generation through family gatherings. In fact, while children may not have been at the Last Supper, they are a central part of the traditional Passover meal; indeed, it can't be fully celebrated without them. And no matter what century it is, where there are kids, there's bound to be some mess.

The telling of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ is an even more significant biblical event, which we tend to make more classic and orderly than it really was. Often Jesus is depicted, especially in Renaissance art, raised high and stately on the cross, his face illuminated by a halo, blood neatly dripping from his side. Many of these paintings are not pretty, but I can't think of one that makes me weep over the brutal punishment he endured for our salvation.

The passion story is messy. I struggle against a temptation to think that God moved behind the scenes to make the agony Jesus endured bearable on some level. Or to consider the halo illuminating Jesus' face throughout art as so strong a sign of his divinity that he was able to numb, through sheer heavenly power, the pain of the thorns puncturing the flesh on his head. Not so. Fully human, Jesus offered his body.

It's difficult to read the Gospels and envision a scene where one army or man battles against another. Jesus' fight was not against flesh and blood, but against the evil that drives sin. As he took our sin and was scourged, kicked, spat upon, and stabbed in his side, he received the cup of sacrifice and did not cry out against it or plead, "I'm innocent! I beg you, stop!"

While God fulfilled his plan for all humanity through Jesus, there was not one bearable second or one moment of relief. The betrayal is not justifiable and nothing about the crucifixion

is beautiful. His battle for our salvation is at the same time horrifically grotesque and incomprehensibly exquisite. The passion of Christ is an ugly and messy story of an extraordinary love that could not be stopped.

We cannot deny the mess, whether on the cross, in our churches, or in our lives. But in our church that morning, God intervened and we celebrated communion because of what we share as Christians, the remembrance of Christ entering and changing history through his life, death and resurrection. The visiting man returned to his seat and stayed until the end of worship. Together we experienced what we read over and over in the New Testament, that Jesus breaks into the commotion of lives and events where messy has run amuck. What could have developed into a painful memory for our church, and for me, did not; for when God intervenes, peace overcomes chaos. Because we experience this continuing power of God's sanctification we know Paul's words in Colossians 1 to be true and relevant: "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

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