

“The other side of life’s messiness”

August 14, 2011

Text: *Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Matthew 15:21-28*

I.

Life is *messy*. Think about it: trying to figure out how to make this global economy work; trying to improve the economy here at home. Trying to make our lives work in the midst of all the uncertainty, all the chaos. Life is *messy*.

That’s certainly been true in Washington, where our congress enjoys the lowest approval ratings in the history of however long we’ve been keeping score. Talk about *messiness*, could our government be more dysfunctional?

And Europe, too, has fallen into its own, dismal economic abyss, with Greece near bankruptcy and Italy and Spain not far behind. The recent edition of TIME Magazine reads: **The Decline and Fall of Europe**. Scary stuff.

And now, riots in London—the worst anyone can remember—mostly related to the economy and to the widening gap (which we’ve seen also in the United States) in wealth distribution. One of the telling signs of trouble for any nation is when the gap between the rich and poor is widening, not shrinking. These are *messy* times.

Moreover, look at the ripple of liberation movements sweeping across the Middle East ... in Egypt and Tunisia, in Libya and Syria; and there’s horrible famine in Somalia. All around, it seems, upheaval and uncertainty—*messiness*.

- With the old and deeply entrenched giving way to the new, with its new imagination and energy for the promises of tomorrow.
- With the intersecting of cultures ... the crossing of borders.

And here at home, we’re still trying to disentangle ourselves from two wars, one of which we’re ten years into. How to disentangle? How to disengage? And, more to the point, have we learned anything in all of this?

And across our nation, pockets of fear and anxiety about many things ... mostly about change and the waves of diversity that are pouring over us; some of it—perhaps—even moving in right next door.

- What are we going to do in our nation to function again, to work together, to cooperate? To put people back to work?
- To restore confidence in America?? These are *messy* times.

II.

In multiple ways, our readings this morning from **Isaiah** and **Matthew** give us glimpses into life's messiness. **Isaiah 56**, from the prophet known as Third Isaiah, is from the period known as the **restoration**. This is the period when, after some fifty years in Babylonian exile, thousands of Israelites were, now, returning to the land of Judah and to Jerusalem.

Talk about *messiness*! How would they be able to *go home again*? And what about the remnant communities that had been living in Jerusalem all this time?

1. The lower classes that were never deported to begin with ...
2. and other ethnic groups that had settled in Judah and the holy city?

In an effort to bring peaceful resolution to all this *messiness*, to this almost forced meshing of cultures and groups, Third Isaiah widens the door of God's community to include, not just Israel, but any foreigners who adhere to God's covenants.

CHECK IT OUT:

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord ... to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath and hold fast to his covenants ...

*These I will bring to my holy mountain,
For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*

There's a universalist impulse vibrating through the message of Third Isaiah.

III.

In our reading from **Matthew**,

1. Jesus has departed to a Gentile area, to the district of Tyre and Sidon. There, he runs into a Canaanite woman. (What follows is one of the most strange events in the gospels). It's *messy* from the start because she is a Gentile ... an outsider, a non-Jew, a member of an out-layer group who may be more in to *Herod worship* than *God worship*. So, we have a situation where there is a dramatic crossing of cultures and traditions.
2. However, in her immediate situation, her life has become more than a little complicated (more *messy*) because her daughter has a demon (she's sick). She's no doubt heard about Jesus. However, she's not concerned about cultural and religious boundaries. Her bottom line: she wants her daughter to be healed.
3. She sees Jesus and right away pleads with him: *Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon*. And then, we are startled to see

Jesus sort of dismiss her. At first, he remains silent, not saying anything. But she's not going away. The disciples try to intervene to no avail; and finally Jesus says,

I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

4. Again, we're stunned at Jesus' apparent insensitivity (more *messiness*). How can this be? Finally, she comes and kneels before him, saying, *Lord, help me!*
5. But, again, check out his response: ***It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.***

Again, we're in disbelief. Could Jesus have really said that?

6. But then, the woman, persistent to the end, wins the day, saying to Jesus: *Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.*
7. By now, a light turns on in Jesus' mind and spirit and he *gets it* ... and he begins to understand that the love and compassion in him are not limited solely to his own people. Paradoxically, perhaps, the woman's faith in him changes him. ***Great is your faith***, he says to the woman. ***Let it be done for you as you wish*** ... and the woman's daughter is healed.

Beyond the strangeness, the larger point is that at the end of the day, LOVE wins out. In spite of any hesitation, it is love that guides Jesus' ultimate response to the human need that crosses his path in life.

IV.

As we reflect on this improbable story, there is a lot to wonder about. However, if we look at this Canaanite woman's situation, what was she to do? Her bottom line is the health and well being of her daughter. Isn't it interesting how our survival impulse and innate love of family have a way of sorting out our priorities for us?

On the other side of life's messiness ...

But what about Jesus? Assuming that such an event really happened (And it probably did because, as a *troubling* text, why else would it be included in the gospel stories?), in the aftermath, Jesus might well have wondered something like, ***Wow, who am I? And who are my people? All kinds of folks seem to be responding to my message.***

Clearly, his interaction with the Canaanite woman nudged him to a larger sense of who he was. In terms of his identity—as a rabbi and a man of God—a whole *other* world opened up to him.

What we can learn from this is that if we approach life with the love and compassion of God in our hearts, sometimes the *messiness* of life takes to higher spiritual ground.

V.

What's interesting about this story is how God's love seems to thrive in the midst of such messiness. Clearly, God and the work of the Spirit are trying to bring people together—people of diverse cultures and traditions and religions.

- And sometimes these people live right in our neighborhoods ... people whom we've hardly met, to say nothing of knowing them and having a relationship with them.
- On *the other side of life's messiness*, the grace of God pours over us through our love and support of one another.

In a book entitled, **In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time**, the author, **Peter Lovenheim**, talks about a project he undertook to get to know his neighbors better.

The background for the project was Lovenheim's own neighborhood in a posh suburb of New York where a mother of two was shot and killed by her husband, who then turned the gun on himself. The parents were two doctors who, to the outside world, it seemed, worked out together at the gym, played tennis together and seemed to have a balanced family and work life.

However, in the tragic aftermath of the killings, a different story of their lives emerged—all of which led Lovenheim to the realization that he knew almost nothing about his neighbors. As it turns out, in this upscale suburb, people talked into the night on their cell phones with family and friends who live miles away, while on their own street they knew very little about one another. To do something about this, he launched a strange project to meet his neighbors one by one.

The *strange* part of the project was—not only did he endeavor to meet them, he asked his neighbors, carefully and tactfully, if they could arrange a time when he could spend the night.

Wow, now that seems more than a little strange, don't you think? It seems intrusive. However, a number of his neighbors (not a high percentage) said yes. His book, **In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time**, was based on this experience—a poignant and often times hilarious description of what he discovered behind his neighbor's doors.

But by the end of the sleepover project, the neighbors DID, indeed, get to know one another and they learned to help one another through the *messiness* of their lives.

VI.

Hey, again, life is *messy*. What our scriptures this morning illumine is that the grace of God works in the midst of the *messiness* trying to ...

- make the crooked straight,
- bring light to the darkness and
- lift up harmony and well-being in our communities.

Our readings this morning serve to remind us that, in the face of our individual differences, we are called to deal lovingly with one another and to have a BIG spirit along the way.

In the melting pot that is *life in America*, this asks something of us.

1. For Jesus, it asks him to have a larger sense of the reaches of his love. Imagine that! We don't tend to think of Jesus, himself, as having to grow.
2. For the Canaanite woman, it invites her to forgo any personal shame or humiliation and—with determination and persistence—to pursue the well-being of her daughter ... in other words, to not give up in her fight for justice.
3. For the Jewish exiles returning from Babylon, it prompts them to a larger, more inclusive view of community. They would have to make sweeping adjustments in the way they conceived of themselves and their future life in Judah and in Jerusalem.

In many ways, these are tough scriptures to wrestle with. Again, they ask something of us. It's not just *same ole', same ole'*. To work our way through the current *messiness* of our lives, friends, we have to grow. We have to become bigger people ... opening wider the doors of our hearts and our lives; and we have to get to know one another better.

Love means seeing *the other* as our brother or sister ... no matter anything about them. That's a high calling. And when that happens, the heavens rejoice and God's blessings pour over us.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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