

Messy Church

May 30, 2021

A few years back, a colleague shared the term “Messy Church” to a group I was working with. Messy Church is a movement to rethink how we do church, blending Faith Formation and worship, and breaking down some of the very proscribed patterns that have grown up in church practice.

In Messy Church, people sit around tables, there’s food and art and music and conversation. The idea is that the congregation is more active, that worshippers are more participative, and that for some, this helps them to be more engaged in their faith.

I bring this up today – not because I’m proposing that Union start doing Messy Church, though there are some really appealing components to it – but because I found it fascinating that the very name, Messy Church, put off some of the people in our group. The idea of Messy Church is that Jesus never said you need to sit quietly in neat, orderly pews, facing forward in order to worship, and that for some, doing church differently might help their faith to come alive. But, for the group I was working with, they just couldn’t get past the name Messy Church. The idea that “if something is messy, it needs to be cleaned up,” was so deeply part of their thinking that they couldn’t see past the word messy.

This experience of being wedded to a particular way of doing things and struggling with a new concept because of how it intersects with our current language and way of doing things comes to mind this week with our scripture readings. We have stepped from the season of Easter into the season of Pentecost and the message that keeps coming to me about Pentecost is that God cannot, will not, be boxed in. That, sometimes, a mess is Godly.

Now, I know it is the human tendency to try to put order to things. We like patterns and structure. And, our God is the God of order. That’s part of the genius of the first creation story in Genesis: God created order out of chaos, created land and sea, light and dark.

As a parent of a one-year-old, I’m so conscious of the power of structure and repetition. Josie is able to learn and grow because she perceives patterns. Having a bedtime ritual helps her to feel safe and understand what is going on. She helps to put her arms through the straps in her carseat because she’s learned that pattern. BUUUUT, as much as our God puts order to things, as much as our God is a God of pattern and structure, God is also one to mix things up, and the experience of Pentecost is exactly that.

Dr. Claudio Caravhales of Union Seminary puts it this way:

To experience Pentecost it is necessary to search for change and to allow ourselves to be changed. Changes mean new forms of consciousness, awareness, commitments, and agency. What is it in your life that needs to be changed?

Like seeds, we must learn to let go and die so we can sprout into life! Be uprooted from ways of thinking and believing and be taken by the Spirit, flowing with God's grace to more expansive ways of living our faith in our world today.

Pentecost, the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit, is our experience of God shaking things up, God making a mess, God looking at the ways we've ordered things and saying, "Those aren't my ways," or "Those aren't the only ways that are pleasing to me." When we think of the Holy Spirit breaking in to the world, when we think of God saying "Those aren't my ways," the racial justice movements we're in the midst of come to mind. I believe with every fiber of my being that the Holy Spirit is at work in the anti-racism movements that are questioning and upending decades and centuries worth of policies and structures that are devaluing whole communities and cultures.

In Acts 2, we hear a series of pairs through which God will work. This isn't meant to be binary, isn't meant to be an exhaustive list. Rather, it's meant to break down the exclusive thought patterns of the day. YOU thought God could only work through your sons, well the Holy Spirit is going to work through your sons and your daughters. YOU thought God could only work through people of a certain age, well the Holy Spirit is going to work through the young and the old alike.

In Acts 2, we hear that the Holy Spirit will even work through slaves, thus disrupting economic exploitation and classism. In short, sometimes, the Holy Spirit makes a mess, makes a mess of the neat little boxes that we've created that really aren't of God.

If you've spent much time in church, you've probably heard of Pentecost described as the birthday of the church. More than a birthday, I'd call Pentecost the inception of the church because our modern day celebrations of birthdays are a little too sweet and a little too individualized. The idea of Pentecost as the birthday of the church isn't to say, "My! How you have grown!" as we do at children's parties, nor is it to say, "Well, I made it another year!" as people my age tend to do. Pentecost is to say that Jesus' first followers had such a deep belief in the ways of God which Jesus taught and modeled that a couple of months after he died they had the courage to surround themselves with others who were also about his radical ways of love and justice, and that in the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit they had the gifts to upend some of the neat, orderly ways of doing things that weren't working for a lot of people.

If there's a power in being part of a church, if there's a grace in being part of a group of Jesus' followers, it's similar to the power of a crowd. A great, albeit silly example of the power of a crowd is in the movie "When Harry Met Sally." If you remember the movie, at one point, Harry and his best friend go to a New York Giants game. They're sitting in the stands, talking about the fact that Harry's wife had left him the day before. They're having a pretty intense conversation, and yet every time the wave goes around the stadium, Harry and his friend stand up and raise their arms with the crowd.

Crowds have a power in themselves, and those of us who participate in church seem to understand that. I've long said that people don't come to worship because of the brilliance of the preacher or the quality of the music; with the advent of the internet, you

can find just as high of quality preaching and music elsewhere (even though our music really is phenomenal). People come because of the relationships, we come because of the community, we align ourselves with this crowd because we know that we're better together, that we can trust this crowd to carry us in Godly directions, and that amidst the patterns and the structures of this world that are not Godly, this crowd has the potential to together be agents of the coming of God's kingdom.

Friends, you've heard me share before that I believe one of the most faithful questions we can ask is, "Who would hear this as good news?" As we step into this season after Pentecost, I ask you, "Who will hear that the Holy Spirit is on hand to shake things up as good news?" Who will experience good news because our church exists, together, as a band of Jesus' followers?

Some churches call the summer and fall Ordinary Time, but I'm glad ours calls it the Season after Pentecost because including Pentecost in the name of the season should be a constant reminder that there are some messes that are Godly, that there are some times when God needs us to make a mess of structures and traditions and policies and institutions that may have brought order but have not brought justice and abundant life, and that as a community God has poured out an extra portion of blessing upon us via the Holy Spirit. May we, in turn, be a blessing.

Alleluia, and amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31, John 15:26-27; 16:7-15 (off lectionary)
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