

TOO MESSY / "Introductory" / September 12, 2015

Guys, these are some of our family, and what they are doing is profoundly good. In fact, they are doing what we are going to be talking about this Fall. They need some help. They have designated a "Love Your Neighbor" week - Starting on October 3. They are going to need some people to help as we do quite a bit of work on 15 or 20 of those mobile homes, helping them prepare for Winter. There are some signup sheets out at the serve desk. This is a chance for you to get your hands dirty, for God. ...

Someone very close to me faced a decision, and she wanted my opinion as to what she should do. She had been invited to lunch by a former student. Now it's quite an honor when a former student invites your input into their life, when they seek your counsel. But what made this one more complex is that she is very Christian, and he was very gay. Why would an 18 year old boy need to tell his Junior High teacher that he was gay? Was he testing whether she still loved him, or whether she would push him away now?

Well, during the course of their lunch he asked whether she would be willing to go with him to a gay review - which I think is kind of like a fashion show for gays. And because she was very close to me, she asked me, "Should I go?" ... Now, what would you advise her? And then she said to me, "Wouldn't Jesus go? Didn't he go to the parties of the tax collectors and sinners, to reach them?" By the way, I won't tell you what I told her; nor will I tell you what she did.

Guys, the world we live in is a very messy place, and it is often very difficult to figure out how to live as Jesus followers in it. I suppose it has always been that way, to some degree. I grew up in the 60s and the 70s. Our nation was torn apart by Vietnam. We were struggling to move beyond the cancer of racism. Feminism was heating up. The sexual revolution was challenging our cultural moral values and the model of the traditional family. Then *Rowe v Wade*, and the abortion wars started up.

And Christians struggled. We Jesus followers were divided. Some of us supported the war, others hated it. Some of us hated racism, others of us tried to claim God's support for it. Some of us were feminists, most were not. Some

of us were open to at least some pieces of the sexual revolution, most were not. And we struggled, as Jesus followers, to figure out ... how do we nudge messy people in our messy world towards Jesus. Because that was our job, wasn't it?

But that world seems quite tidy compared to the messiness of our world. Now we live in a world that makes heroes out of transgender former athletes and villains out of Christians who refuse to support gay weddings. Some are trying to remove every vestige of racism from our culture: declaring war on the confederate battle flag, tearing down monuments to confederate heroes, and "confronting" any hint of racism in our politicians or our police - "Black lives matter"; while others fear they are going too far, and racial tensions are actually heating up again. And our country is just divided on so many other issues: immigration, global warming, gun control, fossil fuels, the role of big government, legalized drugs. We growing more and more polarized.

And even though there are Christians on both sides of all these culture wars, still it has become unfashionable to be us. Once we Christians were normal; now we are considered by so many ... if not quaint and unenlightened, then regressive, and even repressive. We are considered part of the problem, not part of the solution. Which makes it even more challenging for us Jesus followers to figure out ways to nudge very messy people in our very messy world towards Jesus ... which is still our job ... isn't it?

What makes it harder is that we have allowed ourselves to be know by what we stand against, rather than what we stand for. The Barna Group did some intensive study on why the young are leaving the church. What's scary, guys, is that a lot of them are not coming back. But for so many of our younger, the church is just against so many of the things they are for. They tell us the church feels stifling, that we tend to demonize everything outside the church.

- They think we do life with fear, that we are afraid to take risks, that we are overprotective ... they think.
- They tell us that the church ignores real problems of real people. They tell us that the church is at war with science. Or at least lives with its head in the sand ...

- They tell us that our perspectives on sexuality are simplistic, and judgmental.
- They tell us that we are way too narrow, that we are afraid of other religions, or of those who reject religion altogether.

Do you think that any of our teens or our 20 somethings, or maybe some of the younger guests that give us a try ever think any of those things about us, here at Capital City? Well ... guys, we are on a mission from God. But how do we nudge messy people towards Jesus in a world in which we are viewed by so many as part of the problem, not the solution?

Now, I suppose we Jesus followers have always struggled to manage the tension between what our culture believes is right and true, and what we believe is right and true. We have always struggled to figure out how to love messy people and how to nudge them towards Jesus in the middle of that tension.

- Some Christians, some churches, just attack and attack and attack. They revile the world and ridicule the world and threaten the world. And they give us all a bad name - guys like Westboro Baptist, filled with hate. They see the messy as their enemy. And preaching Jesus without grace, preaching Jesus without love, twists their picture of God, and how the world sees us.
- Other Christians just live in denial, or in fear. They go into a protectionist mode and try to separate themselves from the dangers of "the world." Their priority is their own safety. They know the messy are out there, but as long as me and mine are safe, that's okay I guess. Randy told me last week that he went back to his home church. And as he stepped into the church, he stepped back in time. He knew exactly where they were in the worship service, because the order of worship never changed. They used screens, but just to display the words from the same songs they still sang from the same hymnals they still used. His church still sounded like, and looked like, and acted like it was 1950 ... as it separated itself from the culture it feared. Been there, seen that.
- But other Christians have simply surrendered to culture, even when our culture clashes with our faith - they just jump into the mess with both feet. Some Christians have permitted our culture to set their priorities,

and to define their values, and to morph their beliefs. They forget that we live in a world that is at war with God, that we are citizens first of another kingdom, and that we have a mission in this world - to nudge people towards Jesus.

Well, we want to take a different path here at Capital City. We believe we are on a mission from God. We believe it's our job to bring messy people in our messy world face to face with Jesus. We don't believe we can do that by being defined by what we are against. We don't believe we can do that by living in fear, by retreating into a protectionist mode, or by pretending that our world is not changing. We certainly don't believe we can do that by compromising God's truth. Instead ... we choose to engage real people, messy people (like us), so we can nudge them towards Jesus.

We choose to be a missional church. Now, when I say missional I'm not talking about somewhere far away from here. I'm talking about living right here in Frankfort -- as missionaries. I'm, talking about loving on our friends and our neighbors; I'm talking about serving our friends and our neighbors; I'm talking about living the grace of Jesus - being Jesus - to our friends and neighbors ... so that people can connect with and be transformed by God through us. We still are the light of the world, guys; we are still the salt of the earth. We still believe that real life starts when a man is Christ-Driven 24-7.

So, we want to be a different kind of church. We are not going to be like the church some of you grew up in; because we are not living in the world some of you grew up in, and because we are not called to reach those people - we are called to reach our neighbors, in our world.

And the truth is, a whole lot of the churches we grew up in weren't designed to reach people who needed Jesus even in their world, they were designed for church people - a place where we could feel good about ourselves. A whole lot of the churches we grew up in believed church was for the saved, and maybe for those who acted like they were saved. And so a lot of the churches we grew up in had these rules about what you could believe, and what you could do if you were going to be there.

In fact, we created these sin lists, and every generation created a slightly different list.

- The churches of my grandparents and my parents frowned on dancing, and the sin-box we call a TV, and pool halls, and "mixed bathing" (which means guys and girls in the same swimming pool - oh the horror!), and about any form of tobacco, or alcohol, and even dice. Randy tells me that his grandfather got his family a game of Monopoly. But he removed the dice before he gave it to them - because dice weren't permitted. So they had to create these little cards to show how many spaces they could move.
- The churches I grew up in crossed some of those "sins" off the list, but they added others: like abortion, and divorce, and mixed marriages (you know, a black with a white - oh the horror!), and long hair for guys, and beards, and motorcycles, and short skirts, and rock music.
- Churches today cross some of those off the list, but some church people add others, like all these tattoos and piercings, or these basketball shorts the boys wear (often too low), or these yoga pants the girls wear (often too tight), or their addiction to cell phones and texting and snapchat and twitter, or any hint of sympathy with anything LGBT, or anything else that smacks of secular humanism.

What is fascinating is to think of the sins that never made the list, in any generation. We rarely excluded anyone for greed, or for gluttony, or for gossip, or for a critical spirit, or for unforgiveness. In fact, in some churches greed was almost a requirement for church leadership, and gluttony was modeled by our pastors, and gossip seemed like a requirement for their wives. That's kind of mean, isn't it? Well, I'm grateful we have a gracious God.

Guys, the mission of the church, the God-directed mandate of Capital City Christian Church is to present to our world God's truth and God's grace. But it's hard to do both of those together, isn't it? Some churches are pretty good at God's truth, but kind of soft on grace. Other churches are all over grace, to the degree that they don't really care that much what you believe or how you behave.

Well, we want to be a different kind of church. We want to be a church that never compromises on God's truth. But we also want to be a church where grace is not just a word, it's an experience, it's a lifestyle. We want to be a church that looks at sinners through the eyes of Jesus. We want to try to be a church where God's precious children will encounter the same grace and the same truth sinners received when they encountered Jesus. Which means, we'll probably take criticism -- from both sides. Those who are heavy on truth and soft on grace will think we are soft on sin. Those who are heavy on grace and soft on truth will think we are too narrow. Okay. They are not the ones we are trying to please.

I'm telling you guys, when Jesus followers do life the way God intended, when churches do church the way God intended, it is a beautiful thing, a powerful thing. We were never intended to be places where people who are like each other go to feel good about themselves. We are called by God to be his agents, his hands and feet in a world desperate for his truth and grace. And when a church gets it ...

The early church was a melting pot. People who were nothing like each other found grace together. And then they reached out into their world with a passion, and a strength, and a gentleness that captivated people. In a world way more hostile to Christians than our own, we went out to love on people in a whole host of ways.

- Even though we were mostly poor, we shared what we had with each other, and we organized relief projects for the poor.
- In a world where it was still very acceptable to have slaves, some of us started freeing our slaves, and we ransomed others out of slavery. When a plague would hit, we would run in when others were running away. We not only tended our sick, we tended theirs. In fact many of us died tending their sick. And they watched, with their jaws dropped.
- When the Romans abandoned their unwanted babies to die of exposure or wild animals, we would rescue them. In fact we organized teams of wet nurses to keep them alive until other of our families could adopt them. And they watched us, and they were drawn in, and we multiplied.

One Roman emperor named Julian the Apostate hated us, but he was also mystified by us. He said, "These impious Galileans ... (that's us) These impious Galileans not only feed their own poor, but ours also... While the pagan priests neglect the poor, the hated Galileans devote themselves to works of charity." That's powerful! If you read your history - not a history that has been sanitized, but one that tells it straight - we Jesus followers are the ones who elevated women; we are the ones who began true charity - giving with no thought of return; we are the ones who started hospitals, and schools. We are the ones who finally brought slavery down. And the world took notice, and lives were changed - forever.

But here's what happened. Here's what happens over, and over, and over. This is a cycle that repeats itself.

- We start out so well, so selfless, so driven. We set up this attractive, this beautiful counter-culture. We live differently, we treat people differently, we try to be God-honoring, and it is compelling, it's transforming.
- But as we become more numerous, as we become the majority, we forget that we are just pilgrims in this world. We become the establishment, and instead of wooing people with the grace of God, we start pounding them with the truth of God. No longer the persecuted, we become the persecutors. The church has never handled power well.
- Nor do people respond well to an authoritarian church. They start pushing back. They start resisting the hypocrisy of Christians who preach truth without grace. And they start rejecting the "good news" which just doesn't sound so good any more.
- Until finally we find ourselves the minority again. Where we either retreat from the world in fear, or we surrender to the world with compromise ... Or ... we go back to the basics: we begin living differently again, we begin treating people differently again - even when they despise us, we begin serving the people he died for and still loves so passionately.

Now, where do you suppose we are right now, here in the good old U.S. of A? We're right there, between 3 and 4. And I think it is an exhilarating place to be! I think we are positioned to have a greater influence on culture, to see more of the transforming power of God than our parents or grandparents could begin to imagine. I love where we are right now!

Sometimes I hear us old guys wistful about the good old days. We send these emails to each other about the good old days, about how much better it was back then. Well guys ... I don't care about the good old days. I don't care about what was. I care about what is. I have no interest in trying to go back in time; my job from God is to figure out how to influence the times we are in. I won't waste my time on wistful memories. These are the people, this is the culture God gave us to reach with his truth and his grace. So I don't care how we did it back then; I want to figure out how to do it the best way now... You?

And I think that means we have to do it the way Jesus did it. One of the best books I have ever read is Philip Yancey's, *What's So Amazing About Grace*. It is a profoundly good book. And when I read it years ago I was struck by a question that still gets to me. He says, "Why were messy people so attracted to Jesus, and yet so repelled by us, his followers?" Messy people loved Jesus, but way too often they don't love us... I think it's that grace / truth piece. Jesus never compromised on God's truth, but boy did he love them, just the way they were.

It blew the apostle John's mind. Here's how he described Jesus; these are the two things about Jesus that tower over everything else. John says, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1.14) He was full of truth - 100% truth; and he was full of grace - 100% grace ... limitless, inexhaustible grace. Three verses later John says, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1.17) And they are supposed to keep on coming through us.

So that has to be what they find here, at Capital City Christian Church. That has to be what they find in us Christ-Driven 24/7 Jesus followers: truth without compromise, and limitless, inexhaustible grace. Which means ... which means we are going to have to be willing to get messy, like Jesus. You see, when people were messy, Jesus leaned in. When people are messy today, our inclination is to lean away, lest some of the mess gets on us. But love doesn't work that way.

We have been a very strong attractational church. We have grown rather large (not Southeast or Southland large, but quite large compared to most churches). But most of our growth is because we have attracted Christians who are looking for a healthy church. We want way more of our growth to come because messy people are finding truth and grace here.

Guys, that means we want more messy people inside these walls. They'll fit in; most of us are pretty messy too. We won't be requiring that they clean themselves up before they sit by us, and worship with us, and explore God with us. We're going to challenge you to love them just as they are, while we are inviting them to join us on a path that is different. We are going to challenge some of your notions of truth and grace. We are going to challenge you to be more concerned with their soul, than with their dirt.

And we're going to be criticized. Jesus was too. And this journey will make all of us uncomfortable. That's okay, those who followed Jesus were frequently uncomfortable. In fact, some of you may even want to find another church... I hope not. I hope you'll stick with us. But bottom line, we'd rather have his pleasure than yours.

We want to be a different kind of church. That's our theme for the Fall; in fact, probably till Easter. We'll break it into several miniseries, but that's the big idea. We don't want to be a church that leans away because they are too messy, we want to be a church that leans in to the messy. We want to tear that second "o" off the wall. That's what he did, for us; that's what we want to do for them, and for him. Doesn't he deserve that?

Are you willing to be what God called you to be, to do what God called you to do ... whatever, wherever, however, whenever? That's what you are going to be offering him in this song we are going to sing:

In my heart in my soul, Lord I give you control
Consume me from the inside out Lord.
Let justice and praise become my embrace
As I love you from the inside out ...