

To the Messy: Towels -- 1/3/16

Part 1: The Challenge

I suppose it is fitting to view the church as a locker room, and to look at the pastors as the coaches of the team. After all, the game is really not in here, inside these walls; it's out there. This is where we come to get taped up, to get fired up, to get chewed on (when necessary), to review the game plan, to pull together as a team. This is where the team gathers to prepare for the game, which for the most part is out there. You buy that?

It was July 1985, I think. Randy, who is now my preaching partner -- Randy and I had both just started at Kentucky Christian College. I was a Bible prof, and Randy was the Dean of Students and the Assistant Basketball Coach. Well, Randy was in Dick Damron's office (Dick was the head basketball coach) when Dick got a phone call from a young man named Craig Yates. Craig was an incoming freshman who wanted to try out for the team. He was 22 years old (a little older than the typical freshman), he was married, and he intended to commute from Portsmouth, Ohio, about an hour away. That is not the recipe for a successful prospect. Then it got worse. When Dick asked him where he had played before, Craig said, "I never have, but I've always wanted to."

Now you have to appreciate the courage that call took. Truth is, the stands are full of people who always wanted to, but never have ... because they never really tried. At least all of you guys are here in the locker room. At least you guys have been training for the game... Well done. But now it's time to move from training to doing. And that's what this morning is all about.

Last September we lasered in on a verse of scripture that a whole lot of us Jesus followers have heard before, but not too many of us have really pondered. Jesus said, "Go and learn -- go and learn -- what this means (study on it): 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" (Matthew 9.13) Jesus says, "Study this, ponder this, learn what this really means." Well I guess I never really had. I'd never really stopped and pondered this big idea: "God desires mercy, not sacrifice." He wants mercy, not sacrifice. So we've spent four months studying what that really means -- God desires mercy, not sacrifice.

Those first two words: "I desire," "God desires," they are huge! Does it matter to you what God wants? If you are on this team, it should. Because the sole requirement for joining this team is our confession that Jesus is our "Lord." That means, what he desires is more important to me than what I

desire. A Jesus follower says, “Your will for me is more important than my will for me.”

And God says, “I desire ... mercy, not sacrifice.” Mercy, above sacrifice. You see, sacrifice is about getting clean, and staying clean. Mercy is about getting dirty. Sacrifice is about separating myself from anything that might make me impure; it’s about leaning away from the impure. Mercy is about leaning in. Sacrifice is about making things better for me; mercy is about making things better for you.

Now ... I would have expected God to say, “I desire mercy and sacrifice.” I want both -- because, in reality God honors both. But if they clash – and they will, God says, “Mercy wins.” You see, God is revealing his priorities. Sacrifice is important; our holiness, our purity is important to God. But our mercy, our grace, our compassion is ... more important, to God. So when it comes to a choice between staying clean, and getting my hands dirty for God, when those options clash – and they will – God says, “You choose mercy, you choose grace.”

Now, that’s harder than it sounds, because the only time people need mercy is when they are disgusting, when they are messy. But Jesus says, “When people are messy, I want you lean in.” We want to lean away, because we know that when we lean in, some of the mess will get on us. We want to build walls that protect us from messy people ... walls that God does not honor. But God says, “I desire mercy ... not sacrifice.” ...

Well Craig Yates told Coach Damron, “I never have – played any organized ball – but I’ve always wanted to.” Well Dick laughed out loud, Randy about rolled. But they told Craig there would be open tryouts in September and he was welcome to give it a shot. And so when September rolled around, Craig walked on to the floor – 6’1”, although a very stout 220. They could tell he had never played organized basketball before, but they could also tell he was very talented athlete. Now, fortunately for Craig, the team wasn’t very good that year; they had lost 4 starters from the year before, nearly everyone was new. So he made the team.

For most of the pre-season Craig was kind of lost on the floor. At 6’1” he seemed too short to play in the post, but he was too slow to play on the perimeter ... but he played hard. He fought for rebounds, and he dove on the floor for loose balls. He listened, and he learned. Well, the week of the first game one of the starters cut practice without good reason. Dick and Randy had to bench him for the opening game. They talked together, “Who should we start in his place.” Randy said, “We don’t really have great options, why not give Yates a shot. At least he practices hard.” So Craig started his first game. 18 points, 12 rebounds in his first game ... playing in

the post, at 6'1"! In fact he started every game that year, working like a dog: setting screens, rebounding, taking the ball out ... whatever he could do to help his team win.

At the end of his freshman year Craig went to Randy and said something flat-out crazy. He said, "I want to be an All-American"! He had played one year of organized ball. He was 6'1", playing in the post, and his goal was to be great, an All-American. Now I can understand the dream. My grandson Steven is 8, and he wants to be an All-American at UK. It's cool to dream. But a 6'1" center? He was strong as a bull, but he was also kind of slow, with only one year under his belt? Randy said, "Well, if you are going to be an All-American, if you want to be great, you are going to have to do the hard stuff, the thankless stuff, and you are going to have to do whatever it takes to make your team and your teammates better." ...

Huh ... Their conversation was very much like one Jesus had with his disciples. They were out on the road and the disciples were kind of picking at each other – the kind of argument you'd expect from teammates. They were arguing about who was the greatest. Peter says, "I score more points." James says, "I get more rebounds." John says, "I have more assists." Thomas says, "I am the shut down defender." Judas says, "I have more steals."

And what Jesus said to the disciples is very similar to what Randy told Craig. He said, "If you want to be great ..." If you want to be great ... You see, there is nothing wrong with that! I want you to be great. I want you to be a great Jesus follower. I want to be a great Jesus follower. I want a church full of great Jesus followers. I want this to be a great church. Don't you? Jesus says, "If you want to be great, I'll tell you how to get it done." He says, "Whoever wants to be first – whoever wants to be great -- must take last place and be the servant of everyone else." (Mark 9.35) If you want to be a great Christian, guys – and I hope you do – then be a great servant. If you want to be a great Christian, then don't lean away because they are messy ... lean in. Because ... God desires mercy, not sacrifice. That's what greatness is, in his eyes ... And his is the only opinion that really counts.

Well, Randy took over as head coach in Craig's Junior year. He led the team in scoring and rebounding for the third year in a row. The whole team was full of overachievers, a team of servant athletes, who battled to be great. They were amazingly unselfish kids who didn't worry about the credit as long as they won, a team that was way better than the sum of their parts. They were too small, no real superstars. And they won the first national championship for Kentucky Christian College. And Craig, the 6'1" center was named first team All-American. Go figure! By the way, Craig is

now one of the pastors over at Broadway Christian Church in Lexington.
Great athlete, great pastor!

And here's the deal: You can be great too! Every one of you. Remember? Jesus told us how. He said, "Whoever wants to be first – whoever wants to be great -- must take last place and be the servant of everyone else." Because God desires mercy, not sacrifice.

Now, that national championship team at KCC was chock full of overachievers, a team of servant athletes, who battled to be great. Their small forward was 6'3". He scored about 10 points a game, was a solid rebounder. He often took the toughest defensive assignment in the post, and I believe he led the team in assists – which is pretty cool for a small forward. Randy tells me he was probably the smartest player on the floor, and he had a pretty amazing servant heart. The team actually had 6 starters – six guys who should have started. Well, Randy told this guy he would be the first man substituted for; not because he had done anything wrong, but because Randy knew this guy would do that for the team. We are lucky to have this athlete as one of our assistant coaches here at Capital City. Coach Todd Layne. Wasn't he cute?

Part 2

It was the biggest game of his career. He also knew that this would be the final game that he would ever play. Jesus was the epitome of a player/coach. Knowing that the big game was in front of him, he did what most coaches do...they have some very important pregame activities that prepare them for the big game. One of the things he did was he went to talk to his coach. His dad had a long coaching career. The other thing he did was he gathered his players together and had a team meeting and a pregame meal. You see it was imperative that his team get the game plan.

Something was missing at the player meeting. I don't know where the manager was, but he was supposed to wash everyone's feet. This was just a pregame ritual. I think the coach told the manager to come a little late to see if one of his players would step up and do what was necessary for the team but no one did.

So he got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he had around him. (John 13:4-5 NLT). This was his greatest opportunity to show them what they would have to do to be successful out there on the court. I believe that individually he went to each one and took off their sandals and begin to wash off their feet.

As he got down in front of each person, I believe he told them how much he loved them. I believe he looked them in the eye and reminded them of the good times. I believe he told them what their role was in the master game plan.

Do you know what most coaches do in the pregame talk? They usually have white board and they write three or four really important bullet points for the team to focus on.

From this experience of Jesus washing his disciple's feet, I think there are three or four points that Jesus highlights for us.

#1 - Get a Towel

Today, we are going to give you a gift. The gift is a small little box. Inside is a towel. Gifts are best for their use and that leads me to the second bullet point.

#2 - Lean into the mess.

Jesus was willing to lean into dirty feet. But in reality, for the last three years he had leaned into their messy lives. Are you willing to lean in?

Let me tell you what leaning in for me is going to look like for the next 2 to 3 months. A lot of you know that I work here at the church part time. The other part of my time I provide counseling for individuals and companies. One area of focus is in counseling he's working with marriages where there has been an affair. I've worked with close to 2000 couple of had affairs. Over this last year, there've been to individuals stories go beyond most of the people I work with. If I told you their story, you would not be able to believe the details of what they have gone through. You would be amazed that they could still hang in there and try to remain faithful to their marriage and their spouse. These two people have wanted to talk with someone else in their situation, but because their situation is so extreme no support group really fits them. 50 about two weeks ago, I asked both of them if they would like to begin meeting every two weeks. I told them I just wanted to encourage and try to serve them. There's no cost, there's no fees. We're using a book that doc put me onto called embracing the love of God. When we know we are loved, accepted, forgiven and cared for by God, we can do that for others. I don't know what God is going to do but they are willing to lean in and so am I.

So when you get your gift and open it up, it says, "Toe Messy: Lean in to the mess. Capital City Christian Church. Christ—Driven 24/7." And you'll

find a card. The card says: "One of God's greatest gifts to you: An opportunity to lean in to the messy!"

#3 - Get the towel dirty. Would you begin praying for opportunities to lean into the mess? Ask God to give you his eyes to be able to see the way he sees people. Getting the towel dirty is not cleaning up your room. It's not going to work. It's not doing your daily responsibilities or obligations. It's going a 2nd mile. It is doing things that require words like humility and sacrifice.

The other day I was talking with Steve and Amy. Amy began telling the story of when it was raining really hard and there was a car in the road that had stalled. The wife was in the driver side steering and the husband was trying to push the car on his own. Normally Steve would have just buzzed around the car because he admittedly, is very selfish. Steve pulled over got out in the rain and help the guy push the car out of the way. Amy said that he got back in the car and balled like a baby. He had leaned into the mess and God was shaping his heart.

#4 —Turn in the towel

As a player, when you finish with your towel, you throw it in a hamper. When you lean in and get your towel dirty, we want you to bring it back to church and out in the foyer will be a hamper. Before you put it in the hamper, we want you to do a couple of things: 1) Write a short description on the towel of what you did to lean in. 2) Fill out the card and turn it in because we want to know about your story. We hope each week somebody is up here sharing their story.

In 1988, when we won the National Championship, the school was given banner to put in the gym. Before 1988, the walls in the gym were pretty bare. They had 5 small Regional Championship banners. After 1988, the school went on to win a total of 7 National Championships and many other Regional Championships. Most of the players on those teams would tell you that those banners aren't just about wins. They represent hard work and sacrifice. They represent guys who became not just teammates and friends, but brothers. They represent guys whose lives have been changed.

You may have seen some towels hanging from the ceiling in the lobby as you came in today. This is where we are going to celebrate your story when you lean in to the messy. We hope to have 1000 towels on the ceiling by Easter. These towels celebrate mercy meeting messy. They will celebrate lives that are being changed.

Guys we have to get this. Jesus knew his guys had to get this. "After washing their feet, he put on his robe again and sat down and asked, 'Do you understand what I was doing?'" Look what Jesus goes on to say, "And since I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you?"

Right now we are going to celebrate Jesus leaning in to our mess by going to the cross for our sin. On the table you'll find a tray with a small piece of bread, and a small cup of juice. It represents the sacrifice of his broken body and his blood for you and I. You will also find a black offering box — that's where those of us who call Capital City home give our first part back to God. He deserves that. If you don't call Capital City home, feel no obligation to put anything in that black box. And you will also find the white generous bucket. We use every dollar that goes in that bucket to lean in to the messy as a church family.

On the worship station you will also find these little boxes of towels. Here's the deal: don't take one unless you are willing to use it. If you take a towel, you're saying, "I'm in. I'm willing to lean in to the messy when God opens that door." And he will. Look at the promise in Ephesians 3:20. Read it with me. "Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think."

Part 3: Vision Casting

By the way, I was there at KCC with Craig Yates and Todd Layne. All I can tell you is that they weren't man enough to play a real sport. 40 minute halves with no timeouts. No stoppage of play when the ball rolled out of bounds. No timeouts because you got trapped in the corner. Ah those were the days! But on to more serious stuff. Right?

Guys, it's time to stop talking about it and start doing it. Can you imagine what it will be like on Easter morning to see 1000 towels, 1000 banners hanging in our foyer? What will that say to our guests that morning? I hope it will show them that this place is full of people who want to be great Christians! Will you help us get it done?

If you didn't take a towel from one of the worship stations, you can still get one before you leave this morning. But remember, when you take a towel

you're saying, "I'm in. I'm willing to lean in when God opens a door." You don't have to use the towel when you lean in, but we want you to bring it back the next Sunday so we can hang it up as a symbol of your service. Write on the towel the ministry that you have done.

And then, if you are willing, pick up another one. We'll have more boxes at the Serve Desk over the next few months. I know a lot of you here this morning like the CATS but this isn't a one and done team or ministry. We want this to be who we are and what we are about every day, every week, every month and every year at Capital City---Leaning in to the Messy!

But wait, there's more! On the weekend after Easter we are going to have a "Lean In" day. We've had days like that before — our Reach Out days. We've sent teams all over our town for different service projects at different community organizations. We want this to be bigger.

In the past we had 8 -10 teams who went out. This time we'd like to see 25 or 30 teams spreading out across this community doing everything we can to make a difference. What would it say to our neighbors if they saw that we were willing to use a Spring Break weekend to love on the messy in our community?

I know some of you are probably thinking but I've already got Spring Break Plans. Can you give up one day of that break to help us make an impact on our community? Can you wait and leave on Saturday after you've served on one of our teams?

Now in the past our Outreach teams have identified some service projects for us to work on. This time we want your input. We want you to look for some ways for us to get our hands dirty. I'd like you to bring those Ideas to me.- Stop by the office. Drop me an email. Give me a call. And we'll need some of you to step up and lead our Lean in teams. Each of our teams is going to need a project leader. If you are willing to help us pull this together, please come and see me.

Guys, we want you to want to be great Christians! And we want Capital City to be a great church! Are you in?

This morning is all about shifting from talking the talk to walking the walk.
Will you pray with me as we ask for God's help in getting this done?