

## TOØ MESSY / “A Messy Christmas”

### Sermon 2: “A Messy Mary”

December 6, 2015



Now I suspect that when most people think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, they default to one of these two scenes. It's either the Madonna and child, or the Pieta. It's either Mary the new mom, holding that precious baby in her arms, or Mary the grieving mom, holding her dead son in her arms. By the way, that's one of the most famous sculptures ever, by a guy named Michelangelo. And I just love that picture of Madonna and child.

But ... What kind of mother gets a whole day out of town before she realizes she's left her kid behind? How many of you guys have forgotten a kid? We have. How many of you guys have forgotten a kid and then seriously debated whether you should go back and pick them up? Well, there is this cool scene in the Gospel of Luke. Mary and Joseph (mom and dad) and Jesus, who is 12, travel south to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. (*Luke 2.44*) When the feast is over, mom and dad and their family and friends head back north, thinking Jesus is tagging along somewhere with his friends or something. (*Luke 2.45-46*) They don't discover he's missing until a day later! Now I'm not dissing on Mary. Even though moms are usually really good at knowing where the kids are and what they are doing (dads not so much), moms still mess up. And so did Mary.

This next scene is a little weirder. Fast forward 20 years or so. Jesus has left home, and he is out doing what Jesus did: he's preaching, and teaching, he's doing these miracles, and stirring up a whole lot of trouble. In fact, some of the people were calling Jesus demon possessed. So here's what happens ... this is weird. The Gospel of Mark says, "When his family heard what was happening (that he was stirring up trouble), they tried to take him away. "He's out of his mind," they said." (Mark 3.21) We find out a few verses later that it was his mom, and his brothers. Mary thought he had flipped, and he needed protection, from himself. Is that weird to you? It is to me.

You need to understand that this is the same mom who bore Jesus as a virgin! She knew he was special. This is the same mom who had had an encounter with Gabriel, an archangel. Gabriel had told Mary who Jesus really was, and what he was sent to do. And Gabriel's message was confirmed repeatedly by people who were close to her. And still Mary doubted! She still didn't trust that Jesus knew what he was doing. Isn't that weird?



One more scene. (*Pieta*) Do you know what makes this picture so poignant? You see ... Mary not only knew her baby was dead, she thought he was going to stay dead. There is simply no evidence that Mary had any expectation that her son was going to rise from the dead – even though he had predicted it repeatedly. Guys, if a mama knew her son was going to rise from the dead on the third day, don't you think she would have been there, at the tomb, with cookies for the guards, all excited? But the only ladies at the tomb that morning were bringing spices to anoint his body – because they expected him to stay dead. You see, Mary didn't believe either ... yet.

Now listen. I'm not trying to disrespect Mary. What I'm trying to show you is that she was normal. Now in some ways she was a remarkable lady. But in other ways, she was a mess – just like you. She was messy when God chose her, she was a messy mom, and she died a mess. But this is huge: God is really good at using messy people. God is really good at gracing messy people. God blesses messy people, because that's the only kind there are. Isn't that cool?

Now ... if I was God ... That's a terrifying thought, isn't it? But if I was God and I if was choosing a girl to take care of my son ... what would I be looking for? Now I don't think I'd care if she was rich or famous, but I would want someone who was stable physically, and stable mentally, and spiritually, and financially. I'd want someone who knew what she was doing – with really good mom skills -- who would care for my son well. It fascinates me who Hollywood chooses. Here are some of the more famous Marys of film. Do you old guys remember any of these? From movies like King of Kings, and The Gospel According to Matthew, and The

nativity Story, and The Greatest Story Ever Told. A serene beauty, a calm, The one who jumps off the screen for me is Olivia Hussey, from the movie Jesus of Nazareth, because that movie was so big back in the 70s. I don't think I've ever seen a movie picturing Mary with a normal Jewish girl, like one of these.

That would be a bit more real. Do we have any 12 or 13 year old girls in here this morning? (11-14?) Come on up here. Don't be timid, I'm not going to make you do anything, or say anything... Did you know that when God planted a child in Mary she was probably about 12 or 13 years old? And God didn't go to Rome, or Alexandria, or even Jerusalem to find the perfect girl. He didn't go to their New York City, or Hollywood, or Paris, or London – to find one of the richest, or one of the most famous – like the Marys of our movies. He went to a place like Frankfort, actually Nazareth would have been more like a Millville, or a Peaks Mill, or a Bagdad, or a Stamping Ground. And the girl he chose wouldn't have been nearly as sophisticated and educated and privileged as one of these young ladies... Thank you ladies!

Now that's kind of weird, isn't it, to think of Mary as ordinary? It kind of puts a different spin on it to think of Mary as more like of these precious ones. Why Mary? Of all the girls God could have chosen, of all the women God could have chosen, why Mary? Did you know that God blesses messy people, because that's the only kind there are?

Now a lot of folks – a lot of churches – think God chose Mary because she was so special. In the Roman Catholic Church they don't worship Mary – they know only God deserves worship. But they do venerate saints, and they elevate Mary even above the saints – she gets a higher veneration than any other human. Because she is the theotokos – the mother of God. In fact they teach that even her conception – her own conception -- was special, that God protected her in the womb of her mother from the original sin that infects every other human. They call hers the immaculate conception.

But none of that's in the Bible. If you have a Bible with you, or a Bible app on your phone or tablet, find Luke chapter 1. We're going to dig around a little in Luke 1, starting with verse 26. We'll have it as well. Are you ready: Here's what the Bible says about 'why Mary,' about God choosing

Mary. “In the sixth month (it says) of Elizabeth’s pregnancy (now Elizabeth was Mary’s aunt, or cousin, or something – they were relatives, and Elizabeth was pregnant with John the Baptist; anyway, when Elizabeth was 6 months pregnant with John), God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth (Now Gabriel is a big one, one of the two archangels mentioned in the Bible; Gabriel went to), a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary (Luke calls her a virgin, because she had never had sex yet. And even though she was probably only 12 or 13 years old). She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David.” (Luke 1.26-27)

And what Gabriel says to Mary is pretty much guaranteed to blow her mind. “Gabriel appears to her and says, ‘Greetings, favored woman! (favored woman – that’s how they translate it) The Lord is with you!’” Now you are going to have to forgive me for a couple minutes. I taught New Testament Greek for a lot of years. I don’t use it much when I’m preaching, although I use it quite a bit in my study. But the Greek is useful here, because it uses my favorite Greek word. When I send email notes to people I usually sign them: charis ... Steve. Most people don’t know what charis means; that’s okay. I know what it means; it means ‘grace.’ In my own little obscure way I’m saying, ‘Grace to you,’ may you experience, may you be captivated by God’s grace. Occasionally when I am asked to give myself some nickname, I’ll use the word charitomenos. It’s a Greek word; it means: one who has been graced. I think that’s true!

And that’s the word here. Gabriel says, literally, “Greetings, ‘graced’ one.” “Greetings, You who are being graced by God.” Do you know what it means to be graced? It means you are getting something you don’t deserve. It means, gift. You didn’t earn it. It’s not because you are worthy – in fact you are a mess. It’s a gift. “Greetings, graced one.” Do you know why God blesses messy people? Because that’s the only kind there are.

Two verse later, verse 30. Gabriel says to Mary, “Don’t be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God!” (Luke 1.30-31) And you can’t see it in the English, but it’s there in the Greek ... again. The angel says, “Don’t be afraid, Mary, for you have found ‘grace’ with God.” You have found grace. This is not something you deserve, it’s his gift. You didn’t earn it; it’s not

because you are worthy – in fact you are a mess. Nevertheless, messy little one, you have found grace with God.

And then Gabriel tells Mary how God will grace her. He says, “You will conceive (you will become pregnant) and (you will) give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.” (Luke 1.31) And Mary responds, most appropriately, “Huh?!” I mean, what would you say if an angel told you that God was going to ‘grace’ you by making you unmarried and pregnant? Mary says, “How?” “How can that happen? I am a virgin.” And Gabriel says to her, “The God who spoke the universe into existence with a word, can speak a child into your womb.” You see, for God, a virgin birth is child’s play.

And here’s the second most important piece in this little story. You see, it doesn’t do a bit of good to be graced by God if you don’t accept his grace. Grace is a gift, but you can push gifts away, even God’s gifts. In fact we do it a lot. God has this amazing grace, but he will never force his grace on us. He’s so gentle. So here’s how Mary responds. She says, to God ... .. “Okay!” “It sounds terrifying, but I’m in.” She says, “I am God’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” (Luke 1.38) It was a perfect response. It is the perfect response for anyone who is graced by God. “I’m in. Whatever, wherever, whenever, however, I’m in. I’m your servant.” You see, Mary is chosen, not because she is so special, but because God is so gracious. But she is remembered, she is honored, because she told God “yes.” And God is really good at using messy people.

And if you start digging around in the Bible, you’ll discover that God works with messy people all the time – because that’s the only kind there are! It’s always grace. One of the most famous men of the Old Testament is a guy named Abraham (you know, the Abraham, Isaac, Jacob Abraham). He is called by God to leave his home, his country, his family, to go to a land that God’s going to show him when they get there. And then God promises to bless the whole world through Abraham and his descendants.

Why Abraham? You see, most people think it was because Abraham was so special. It was because he was the most righteous, the most holy, the most God-honoring man in that world. He deserved it more than anyone else, they figure. But that’s not what it says. Abraham wasn’t called by

God, Abraham wasn't graced by God because he was so righteous. In fact if you read the stories about Abraham, he was a mess. No, it says, "Abraham believed God, Abraham trusted God, Abraham did what God called him to do. And it was for that trust, his willingness to say 'yes' to God, that God called him righteous. It was all grace, to a very, very messy man. But when ordinary messy people accept God's grace, God can do amazing things through them.

That's the way God works, with messes like us. Look at Jesus' disciples. If God had asked me to pick some disciples for Jesus, I don't think any of the disciples of the Bible would have made the cut. I'd have wanted one or two really big scary guys, like Deon, because Jesus was pretty good at making people mad. And I'd have a couple of guys who were really smart, really strategic. I'd pick a couple of guys who were great wordsmiths, great orators. I'd pick a couple of guys who could just get things done. There are doers and shakers. But the disciples Jesus chose were a weird bunch of messy misfits ... graced by Jesus. And when messy men say 'yes' to God's grace, it is simply extraordinary what God can do through them.

Guys, it's all grace... I think as time passes most people feel slightly embarrassed about the lives they have lived. Sometimes way more than slightly embarrassed. We usually start out when we are young with such dreams. This is what I will do. It won't feel like a job because I will love it so much. This is who I'll marry. My marriage won't feel like work because we will love each other so much. This is how many kids we will have and how they will turn out. I will have this kind of home, and these kinds of hobbies. And then life happens.

- You don't land the job you wanted. Or it didn't turn out to be as fun as you imagined it. How many of you guys are not doing what you expected to be doing when you were young? I'm not. I'm not living the dream I dreamed when I was younger.
- Or your marriage is a whole tougher than you thought it would be. Maybe it just fell apart. Or raising kids turned out a whole lot tougher than you thought it would be. It always is.
- Or, you get sick, or your wife gets sick, or your kid gets sick. Or there is an accident, or a fire, or whatever ... life happens.

Or maybe, as time has passed, you have come to be embarrassed about the life you have lived because sin happens.

- Maybe one mistake nudged your life in a whole diff direction ... one bad decision, and you had no idea how big that decision would be
- Or maybe it was a sequence of bad decisions. Maybe your enjoyment of a drink turned into an addiction, and you became an alcoholic. Or maybe your enjoyment of a buzz became an addiction. Or maybe you have gotten caught up in some other addiction ... like porn, or gambling ... there are so many. And you ponder the mess your sin has made.
- Maybe you've become an angry man, or an angry woman, and you hear yourself saying hateful things, and you see yourself doing hateful things. It's embarrassing.
- Maybe when you are quiet, and honest, you feel these deep regrets because you have lied, or you have stolen, or you have cheated, or whatever.
- Maybe your embarrassment is not over something so outwardly grievous, you are just such an underachiever. You know you should do more, you know you could do more, you just don't. And it's embarrassing.

Or maybe, as time has passed, you are embarrassed because your priorities are so out of whack.

- You know you should be a better husband, a better father.
- You know you should be a better friend, a better neighbor.
- You know you have dissed your God, so often. We come back to him, we confess our sin, only to fail again. Because we are messy.

How many of us are embarrassed at least about pieces of the lives we have lived? How many of us fear that we are underachievers, as people, as Jesus followers? How many of us are willing to admit that we really are a mess?

Do you know what's cool! God blesses messy people, because that's the only kind there are. It's all grace. God doesn't choose us because we are worthy, it's all grace. He doesn't choose us because we are so choosable, he chooses us because he is so stunningly gracious. And God is really good at using messy people – if we tell him, “Okay, I'm in.”

I read a description of the church by Philip Yancey nearly 20 years ago. I still think it is one of the most powerful pictures of church I have ever heard. I am going to read you his story. It will take a few minutes, but it will be worth it.

Yancey says, A few times at my church I preached the sermon, then I assisted in the ceremony of communion. “I don’t partake because I’m a good Catholic, holy and pious and sleek,” writes Nancy Mairs about the Eucharist. She says, “I partake because I’m a bad Catholic, riddled by doubt and anxiety and anger: fainting from severe hypoglycemia of the soul.” After delivering the sermon, (Yancey says) I helped nourish famished souls.

Those who desired to partake would come to the front, stand quietly in a semicircle, and wait for us to bring them the elements. “The body of Christ broken for you,” I would say as I held out a loaf of bread for the person before me to break off. “The blood of Christ shed for you,” the pastor behind me would say, holding out a common cup.

Because my wife worked for the church, and because I taught a class there for many years, I knew the stories of some of the people standing before me. I knew that Mabel, the woman with strawy hair and bent posture who came to the senior citizen’s center, had been a prostitute. My wife worked with her for seven years before Mabel confessed the dark secret buried deep within. Fifty years ago she had sold her only child, a daughter. Her family had rejected her long before, the pregnancy had eliminated her source of income, and she knew she would make a terrible mother, and so she sold the baby to a couple in Michigan. She could never forgive herself, she said. Now she was standing at the communion rail, spots of rouge like paper discs pasted on her cheeks, her hands outstretched, waiting to receive the gift of grace. “The body of Christ broken for you, Mabel ...”

Beside Mabel were Gus and Mildred, star players in the only wedding ceremony ever performed among the church’s seniors. They lost \$150 per month in Social Security benefits by marrying rather than living together, but Gus insisted. He said Mildred was the light of his life, and he didn’t care if he lived in poverty as long as he lived it with her at his side. “The blood of Christ shed for you, Gus, and you, Mildred ...”

Next came Adolphus, an angry young black man whose worst fears about the human race had been confirmed in Vietnam. Adolphus scared people away from our church. Once, in a class I was teaching on the book of Joshua, Adolphus raised his hand and pronounced, “I wish I had an M-16 rifle right now. I would kill all you white honkeys in this room.” An elder in the church who was a doctor took him aside afterwards and talked to him, insisting that he take his medication before services on Sunday. The church put up with Adolphus because we knew he came not merely out of anger but out of hunger. If he missed the bus, and no one had offered him a ride, sometimes he walked five miles to get to church. “The body of Christ broken for you, Adolphus ...”

I smiled at Christina and Reiner, an elegant German couple employed by the University of Chicago. Both were Ph.D.s, and they came from the same Pietist community in southern Germany. They had told us about the worldwide impact of the Moravian movement, which still influenced their church back home, but right now they were struggling with the very message they held dear. Their son had just left on a mission trip to India. He planned to live for a year in the worst slum in Calcutta. Christina and Reiner had always honored such personal sacrifice — but now that it was their son, everything looked different. They feared for his health and safety. Christina held her face in her hands, and tears dribbled through her fingers. “The blood of Christ shed for you, Christina, and you, Reiner ...”

Then came Sarah, a turban covering her bare head, scarred from where doctors had removed a brain tumor. And Michael, who stuttered so badly he would physically cringe whenever anyone addressed him. And Maria, the wild and overweight Italian woman who had just married for the fourth time.

“The body of Christ . . . the blood of Christ . . .” What could we offer such people other than grace, on tap? What better can the church ever offer than “means of grace”? Grace here, among these shattered families and half-coping individuals? Yes, here. Maybe the upstairs church was not so different from the downstairs AA group after all.

Guys, it’s all grace. That’s why the church is such a weirdly wonderful place. You see, here we believe that God blesses messy people, because

that's the only kind there are. That is why Capital City is such a weirdly wonderful place. Mabel, and Gus, and Mildred, and Adolphus, and Christina, and Reiner, and Sarah, and Michael, and Maria – they are here, in this room. They are sitting next to you. They are me, they are you. They are Abraham, they are Mary, they are the disciples of Jesus. Messy people who have been graced by God. Messy people who have said 'yes' to God. Messy people who are being used by God in extraordinary ways. There is nothing more cool than the church!