

“We—messy and holy—are the church”
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Mark 8: 27-38

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When the Rev. Billy Graham died four days ago, Facebook lit up with homages to the man affectionately known as “America’s pastor.” Loved for his warm, courteous manner and powerful preaching, Graham transformed evangelism into a modern, world-wide movement. He counseled presidents and is reported to have persuaded more than 3 million people to commit their lives to Christ.

Celebrations, however, were quickly challenged. We were reminded of anti-Semitic audiotapes. We heard stories of LGBTQ persons who suffered under the weight of Graham’s vicious condemnation. We learned about Graham’s criticism of another pastor, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his refusal to join the protest against racial segregation and oppression.

In just a few days, Graham was heralded as both a hero and a villain—the truth probably somewhere in-between.

And that’s what I want to talk about today: the in-between. Because, as we commemorate 500 years of Reformation, we remember a man with a similarly complicated legacy. Martin Luther was the pastor who started it all. He courageously faced excommunication, death threats, and derision, all in advocacy of a truth he believed essential for the soul: that we need not struggle in anxiety and guilt to earn God’s love, but rather can know—right now—that God’s love is freely given and asks only faith. Luther encouraged regular people to read the Bible and know God for themselves.

But this same great man attacked Catholics with hateful language. He authored some of the worst anti-Semitic texts of our tradition, advising that Jewish homes and synagogues be destroyed, their property confiscated, and their freedoms curtailed. When peasants, inspired by him, rebelled against their feudal lords, Luther encouraged their quick suppression, even their murder.

So Martin Luther... hero or villain? The same question could be asked of John Calvin and every other church leader, including me. Our history as a church is marred. It has angels, but it has demons also.

And it all started with Peter. Peter who, in our text today, is having quite the day!

It begins with a beautiful moment for Peter. He speaks with conviction and clarity. He proclaims Jesus the Messiah. In Matthew’s version, Jesus goes on to praise Peter, saying, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will

not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” That’s a good moment for Peter.

But how quickly it all falls apart. One moment he’s getting all the right answers, and then the next he’s completely messing up and being rebuked by Jesus. Now, Jesus is calling him “Satan”! The man, who a moment ago held the keys to the kingdom, is now being told to get out of the way, because he’s blocking the door. He’s got his mind on the wrong things. You see, Peter thought he knew what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah; he thought he had this whole discipleship thing down. So he presumed to rebuke Jesus and try to teach *him*. He didn’t understand that being the Messiah meant suffering and death—and what’s worse, he didn’t understand that he still had a lot of learning to do.

What’s remarkable to me, however, isn’t Peter’s success or failure; it’s that Scripture chose to include both. Even the Gospel of Matthew, with its praise of Peter, doesn’t cover up his failure. And what’s more, the Gospels chose to share these stories in the context of Jesus talking about what it means to be a disciple, to be a church.

In these brief exchanges, the Gospel of Mark beautifully captures a paradox: we are at once holy *and* messy, redeemed *and* sinful. Sometimes we’re unlocking the doors to the kingdom, and other times, we’re just standing in the way.

A lot of people give up on church for this reason. They also give up on themselves. We come to church, we begin to walk our faith journey, and we’re so excited, and everything’s going well... until we discover something ugly about the church or about ourselves. Until we mess up or someone else messes up. And we think: this wasn’t supposed to happen; the church is supposed to be better than this.

I remember sitting in my first Session meeting—an eager youth elder, freshly confirmed, 10th grade, ready to see the glory of the Presbyterian church—and then hearing, during a debate, an elder sitting next to me, a little old lady, call another elder the B-word under her breath. Yep, that’s church.

Church can be disappointing. Not this church of course, but you know, other churches... No one’s volunteering. People care more about the carpet than their faith. That person says that mean thing to you. That other person is weird. You’re just not feeling your faith anymore. And the worship, well, sometimes it feels like a funeral for its own enthusiasm.

I also know that the church sometimes does more than disappoint; it betrays us. It hurts us. It excludes us. Sometimes we’re even the ones doing the hurting.

Unfortunately, the church often has failed to be honest about this crucial moment. Instead of telling the truth, as the Gospel of Mark does, and admitting that we are both holy and messy, the church has covered up the messy parts. It’s pushed out the people who messed up, or who didn’t fit, or who dared draw attention to the mess.

The Reformation wanted us to understand what a great mistake this was. The Reformers saw a church that was so caught up in its holiness that it was ignoring its mess. The Reformers wanted to bring attention to the mess, so that we could see the church rightly: as people.

The church is people, they said. And being made up of people, the church is prone to sin, to mess up, to be human. But that's not all. Because the church isn't *just people*. It's *people brought together by God*. It's God working through people, right now, right here. Working through the mess. Creating something holy.

Martin Luther writes, "In short, the church is a dwelling, in order that God may be loved and heard. Not wood or stones... it should be people, who know, love, and praise God."

The church is both human, i.e. messy, and divine, i.e. holy. The Second Helvetic Confession says we are both the "church militant" and the "church triumphant." The church militant is still struggling, still messy, still in battle with sin and death. The church triumphant is our eternal promise: a church freed of struggle, certain of love, perfected in God, and made one with faith. Like Peter, we live in between the church militant and the church triumphant.

This was important to the Reformers because a church that knows how messy it is will be, ironically, a better church, a more compassionate church, a more faithful church, a more gracious church. A messy church knows it's not God, and so it needs God's help. A messy church embraces messy people. A messy church relies on grace. And in the end, the people of a messy church will realize the truth: God hasn't gathered them because they're holy; they're holy because God has gathered them.

The holy is what God does with our mess.

The holy is this church loving Jenna and me through the loss of our sons; it's you showing up, crying with us—you, the line between us and despair.

The holy is Christians standing outside with candles, in rain, in snow, in heat, to quietly and persistently demand an end to violence.

The holy is Christians holding hands in prison, praying fervently, finding in God a dignity and power the world denied them.

The holy is a woman hiking in prayer for her son struggling with addiction.

The holy is a man crying on my shoulder, because he's scared to die, and holding him through the night.

The holy is you stepping up to rescue two Guatemalan families and working day and night to get them housing.

The holy is you showing up here to worship, to volunteer, to serve another plate of food, to donate another coat, to fix another leaking pipe, to sign another petition, to sit in on another committee, even when you may not feel like it.

The holy is everyone being welcome at this church; it's a love bigger than our flaws, our mistakes, even our worst sins.

This is what makes church special: not that we're perfect, but that we don't have to be. Here, we openly acknowledge, even love, the mess. Here, we talk about our sins, we shine a light on mistakes and injustices, we share our brokenness. Here, we get on each other's nerves, and we screw up, and yet, we never close the doors. We stand together, knowing that we will be transformed, redeemed, not when we hide the mess, but when we show it.

Today, we need a church that is both honestly messy and proudly holy. We need a church that believes God is working through it in beautiful and powerful ways, even while it is still compromised by sin. We need a church that will own up to these sins and look to God for reformation.

But mostly, we need a church that's about grace. The free gift of love. Which is messy, and holy.
Amen.