

“Messy Church”

September 26, 2021

Acts 6:1-7

What is your image of the “true” church? I used to believe that a truly faithful church would be one where everyone gets along, everyone is unified in the church mission, and everyone has a healthy and strong faith. But, that’s not the reality of any churches I know of today. And, it actually wasn’t the reality of the early church that we read about in the Bible, either. It is true, though, that the Holy Spirit was doing amazing things. Thousands of people were becoming followers of Jesus. The church at that time focused on evangelism. They did a lot of preaching, they shared possessions and were generous in giving, and they showed love for each other. But, they also did a lot of arguing, fighting, and dividing. As the early church grew there were conflicts between the leaders, Peter and Paul, Paul and Barnabas. Paul writes about a problem with the Lord’s Supper fellowship meal where some got drunk while others got nothing. There were also heated discussions about whether or not to require circumcision of new believers, and so on.

In today’s passage, the Spirit has been at work, and the church had been growing, spreading across the region. In chapter six, verse one, it says “the disciples were increasing in number…” and in verse seven, it says, “The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests become obedient to the faith.” Even the Jewish priests were becoming believers. In the midst of all this growth, we read about a conflict that arises: “the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.” The Hellenists were Greek speaking Jews, many of whom had been living in foreign lands and had now travelled back to Jerusalem. Instead of speaking the original Hebrew or Aramaic, they would speak Greek, the language of the dominant culture at that time. It seems the Hellenists felt discriminated against by the more dominant Hebrew group. Any time you get people together from different backgrounds, there is bound to be different opinions, resulting in tensions and conflict. Things can get messy.

The 12 Apostles act quickly in order to solve the problem before it gets worse. They propose the appointment of seven new leaders, possibly because Jerusalem had seven different regions that could then each have a representative. The Apostles would then continue the ministry of teaching the Word of God, while the seven would be the ones to “wait on tables.” Here, the meaning could be much more than just serving and distributing food. It could also mean the important task of keeping accounts of the money, and managing the social services. It’s significant that all seven of the people chosen had Greek names. In this way, the Hebrews were sharing more power with the Greek speaking Hellenists, trusting that they would work together fairly.

It’s also significant that the seven were to be people of good standing, and “full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” They needed to have good reputations so people could trust them. It was important that they not just have good sense, but that they have the wisdom of God’s Spirit. This echoes other biblical passages where leaders are to have wisdom and the Spirit of God at work in them. For example, in the book of Genesis, Joseph suggests to Pharaoh that he find a leader who is “discerning and wise” to manage the storing and distribution of grain during years of plenty, so that they can be prepared for the years of famine that would follow. (41:33) According to the story, Pharaoh then selects Joseph himself, because he is, “one in whom is the spirit of God.”(41:38)

So, back to our passage in Acts, the seven who are chosen to help with social services are men who are known to be wise and full of the Spirit. This is later shown to be proven when we see one of the seven, Stephen, “full of grace and power,” doing “great wonders and signs among the people.” (6:8) In Chapter six, verse 10, it says that those who did not agree with him “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.” Eventually those who felt threatened by his challenges put him to death, and he becomes the first martyr. Times were tough for Christians. Life was messy!

But, it was the Spirit of Christ that kept them together. Where do we see God's Spirit at work among us?

I find it interesting that compared with the teaching and preaching of the Apostles, the people who were chosen to do the seemingly less important tasks, such as serving food, were filled with the Spirit. Their work turned out to be just as important as that of the Apostles. Thinking about the church today, we all have different gifts, given us by God's Spirit. Each person and each gift is important, yet we are all united in Jesus Christ. In 1st Corinthians chapter 12, verse four, the Apostle Paul says, "There are many different gifts but the same Spirit." In verse 12 he says, "just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." He is talking about the true church. God loves variety, creating each person as a unique individual. Our different perspectives, abilities and understandings add to the faith community. The church would be pretty weak and boring if we all believed exactly the same things. But, as it is, we always have new things to learn from each other. With these differences, though, things easily get complicated and messy if we focus too much on "fixing" our differences, trying to all be the same. Theologian, Henry Nouwen writes about the important role that our differences play in the church in contrast to the way society handles differences: "...our unique talents are no longer objects of competition but elements of community, no longer qualities that divide but gifts that unite..." (*Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People* ch.29) We can freely share our gifts because our identity is not based on our unique talents. Instead, it is based on our status as beloved children of God.

When people outside the church look at us, it won't be a sense that we believe all the same things that will attract them. Instead, it will be the love of Jesus Christ as shown among us. As we care for each other, even with our differences, others will see more clearly the reality of God's Spirit of love at work among us. In the book of John, chapter 13, verse 35, Jesus says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

As a church, we are united through our faith in Jesus Christ. We may have all kinds of different ideas as to how to follow him, and we may understand parts of the Bible in different ways, but as we listen, share, and pray with each other, we see more and more where the Spirit is at work. Our identity doesn't depend on whether or not we can make a positive difference somewhere. It's not in what we do. It's in who we are through Christ. According to Nouwen, "When we unmask the illusion that a person is the difference she or he makes, we can come together on the basis of our common human brokenness and our common need for healing..." We are all sinners, in need of God's grace. It's when we acknowledge our weakness and our need for healing that the Spirit of God can fill us. At our Thursday prayer meeting, we talked a bit about Jesus' saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." We won't be filled until we recognise our emptiness. This openness can get messy. It's a vulnerable thing to open up to the Spirit. We can't predict what will happen. We may be embarrassed or hurt. But, we can trust that it's the way God can lead us to deeper relationships with God and with each other.

Thinking of the messiness we see in most churches today, it helps to understand that the early church was also not perfect. Just like today, it was made up of sinners, who realise they are forgiven in Jesus Christ, the one who gave his life on the cross. The church was messy. And, it continues to be messy. But within that mess, we find the Spirit of God at work. In coming to live among us, Jesus stepped into the mess of humanity. He didn't stay in heaven with God, sheltered from any harm. Instead, he stepped down to the earth, becoming a vulnerable human being. He experienced the joys and pains of human life. And, in the end, he was tortured and killed on a cross, showing us the way of love, rather than the way of force. "Talk about messy!" God blessed his faithfulness, and raised him to life as Lord of all. Nouwen describes Jesus as "the wounded healer." It's only by stepping into the mess of the world that Jesus was able to show us just how deep is God's love for us. Jesus is an example to us. He wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty, mixing with the outcasts of society, caring for those whom society avoided.

I have to admit that I often want to avoid any messiness. For as long as I can remember, I've been the type of person that tries to stay out of trouble. It feels much safer to avoid potentially "messy" situations. As a child in school, I remember friends bullying a girl from our class. None of my friends wanted to touch her or they might "get the cooties!" If one friend happened to brush by her, he would then become "contaminated" and then everyone would try to stay away from him as well. The fear of being bullied sticks in my mind. I've noticed that over many years, I sometimes had a fear of getting dirty, as if it meant becoming contaminated by some terrible virus. For example, I grew up in an inner city neighbourhood where my parents worked with many people who were low income. Some of them didn't take care of themselves very well, and you could tell they hadn't taken a bath for a while. Sometimes I didn't even want to touch anything that they touched.

I also hated helping my parents with washing our family dishes because I didn't want to touch a dirty dish that someone else had used to eat. I didn't like cleaning up other people's messes. I tried to get everyone to clean up their own messes. But, with three younger brothers, I would often have more than just my own messes to clean up whenever my parents asked for help.

I've changed a lot since then. When washing dishes, and I no longer "fear" touching someone else's dirty plate! But, deep down, I still sense times when I want to care just about my own cleanliness and my own righteousness. The problem with this self-centred attitude is that it ignores the needs of those around me. I often want to make sure I'm OK, but then I forget about everyone else! God calls us to step into the messes all around us. Like the "Good Samaritan" who stopped to care for the man injured on the road, we are called to sometimes get our hands dirty in order to care for others, rather than avoiding the situation. I think I would be like the Pharisees who tried to keep themselves pure by following all the rules. But, like the Pharisees, I'd then be lacking love. It's not righteousness, but love that is the main thing that shows me to be a follower of Jesus. Love is that thing which moves us to step out of our comfort zone in order to give attention and care to those around us. We may make mistakes. It's unpredictable and messy. It's something that you can't just make into rules. It has to flow out of our relationship with Christ. I pray that God will help me grow so I can have the courage to step into the mess and inconvenience of caring more often for people around me rather than just making sure I'm OK.

What is your image of the "true" church? If you think a true church is one that has no conflict, you are actually describing a dead church. There are some churches where no one argues. They may have a strong pastor who tells everyone what to believe. That sort of church may function OK for a while, but when life's challenges come, their faith may crumble. If the church members have not been honestly engaging with each other in deep discussion, sharing and listening to their differences, everything will stay on a surface level, and there won't be enough substance to help them through the tough times. The Spirit of Christ works among the community of believers as we honestly share our deep joys and doubts. We then gain power to remain faithful through life's challenges. It's scary to step into the mess of the unknown, but that is precisely where we'll encounter the power of God at work. Let's pray.

Loving God, you stepped down into the darkness of our messy world. Thank-you for the great sacrifice made for us by your Son, Jesus. Thank-you for Mennonite Japanese Christian Fellowship. Even in our small group, we are amazed at the differences among us. Thank-you for uniting us by your Spirit and sustaining us through many changes for over 20 years. Grant us the courage to face those areas within ourselves that we are tempted to avoid. Help us to trust in you rather than seek personal protection by building walls. By your Spirit, help us to connect with others in an attitude of sharing your love, through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.