

New Hope Sermon August 7, 2021- Ministry is Messy

Introduction

As I have been working through Proverbs for Scattered Flock in the *Passion Translation*, I was struck with the wisdom of Proverbs 14:4:

“The only clean stable is an empty stable. So if you want the work of an ox and to enjoy an abundant harvest, you’ll have a mess or two to clean up!”

A simple truth when it comes to animals. A much more complex truth when you apply this to work with people! So, the sermon this week is entitled: Ministry is Messy!

The Myth

There is a myth about Christian living and ministry that continually trips us up when we have problems in the work of ministry. This is simply that Christian ministry should be free of conflicts. We should all get along. We should fairly easily work together when we are all under Christ’s Lordship. Just trust the Lord and the differences can be ironed out and all will be well.

There is some truth to this understanding. But unfortunately this myth overlooks two basic realities which cause the messiness in ministry.

Distinct Differences

The first cluster of reasons are cultural and social. We often get involved with people (even in our extended families) we wouldn’t have originally chosen to work or live with. Personality differences are real and can make communication or even trust increasingly difficult. Everyone is not compatible with everyone else. In addition, goals and visions or how to do a certain task or live out a certain role may be at odds. Theology in key areas may cause a divergent set of behaviors and responses. Cultural values may clash and cause misunderstandings. In fact, people can get entrenched in their perceptions or perspectives and can’t negotiate or talk reasonably through the problems to a win/win resolution with those who differ from them.

An evidence of that in family relationships was cited by David Brooks, New York Times syndicated columnist. In his July 29, 21 column “What is Ripping American Families Apart?:

At least 27 percent of Americans are [estranged](#) from a member of their own family, and [research suggests](#) about 40 percent of Americans have experienced estrangement at some point.

The most common form of estrangement is between adult children and one or both parents — a cut usually initiated by the child. A [study](#) published in 2010 found that parents in the U.S. are about twice as likely to be in a contentious relationship with their adult children as parents in Israel, Germany, England and Spain.

You can add that statistic to the number of missionaries who come off the mission field each year due to insoluble conflicts with fellow missionaries, and another statistic on the number of church splits in North America. Some wounded parishioners from those conflicts have flocked to the group: Fundamentalists Anonymous. This group was started to help ex-fundamentalists deal with the abuses they experienced through fundamentalism. As co-founder Jim Luce said: “these are people who believed themselves to have been so damaged by their all-or-nothing lifestyle most could not even walk into a Mainline church without feeling nauseas.” The group was started because, as a few leaders raised the issue publicly, 17,000 people immediately asked for help! Whether it is in families or churches or missions, it is clear that many in North America experience significant conflicts or break downs in relationships firsthand. (HuffPost, dec.6 2017 “Remembering My Battle Against Fundamentalists” by Jim Luce.) This will result in messy ministry.

Satan’s Tactics

Another reason for these disturbing trends is theological. Paul talks specifically about a number of “Satan’s schemes” to hinder God’s people – unforgiveness, anger, denial, doubt, masquerading as an angel of light, accusations, temptations. Satan and the spiritual forces he commands are intent on destroying everything that

has God's imprint on it, so they are often behind misunderstandings, slander, gossip, accusations (true and false). and "fake news." C.S. Lewis' classic book *The Screwtape Letters* describes these tactics humorously in great detail when the senior devil writes to a subordinate (aptly named Wormwood) about his efforts to derail a new Christian who had been under their influence. (This is a worthwhile summer read if you are not familiar with it.)

Messiness in relationships in the New Testament

The New Testament has several examples of the success of Satan's destructive tactics— often in severe conflicts between leaders in the early church. The ideal first missionary partnership between the dynamic trailblazer the Apostle Paul and the seasoned encourager and church planter Barnabas (from Acts 13-16) broke apart over a dispute about taking Mark, Barnabas's cousin, with them on a return trip to visit the churches they planted on their first missionary journey. Acts 15:36-41 tells the story:

³⁶ After some days, Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's travel to the regions where we've preached the word of God and see how the believers are getting along."

³⁷ Barnabas wished to take Mark (also known as John) along with them, ³⁸ but Paul disagreed. He didn't think it was proper to take the one who had deserted them in south-central Turkey, ^[a] leaving them to do their missionary work without him. ³⁹ It became a heated argument between them, a disagreement so sharp that they parted from each other. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus. ⁴⁰ And Paul chose Silas ^[b] as his partner. (Cypress was Barnabas' place of origin). (Passion Translation)

The sad result was that we never hear about Barnabas again (though many say he is the author of the book of Hebrews.) The Acts historian Luke apparently joined up with Paul and Silas, Paul's new ministry partner, and the chronicle of their missionary journeys form the remainder of the book of Acts.

A second disagreement that caused strife in the church was between two women leaders in Philippi. Paul loved the Philippian believers and urged the womens' reconciliation:

² And I plead with Euodia and Syntyche to settle their disagreement and be restored with one mind in *our Lord. ^[a] ³ I would like my dear friend and burden-bearer ^[B*] to help resolve this issue, for both women have diligently labored with me for the prize and helped in spreading the revelation of the gospel, ^[c] along with Clement ^[d] and the rest of my coworkers. All of their names are written in the Book of Life. * (the word burden-bearer is "Syzygos, possibly one of the pastors of the church at Philippi).

Often today, around the world, this kind of disagreement between leaders (whether they are men or women) takes on political overtones and is a struggle for power. The whole church suffers as people takes sides with one over another and a split occurs. Ministry is messy!

It is noteworthy to mention that the messiness is often caused in Christian community because people bring their own unresolved issues and woundedness, immaturity, unrepentant behavior and fleshly attitudes into the community. If these issues remain unresolved, the cost to the church can be great. But if there is a willingness to deal with the issues, God's work can go forward.

However, it does not always happen. For example, we see the incredible pain and persecution that resulted for Paul and his co-laborers over the issue of circumcision for new Gentile believers. The Judiazers (who were Jewish Christians) insisted that the new Gentile believers had to abide by the Jewish ritual of circumcision to be fully admitted into the church. When Paul refused and insisted on the gospel of grace alone for them, the Judiazers determined to silence Paul and relentlessly persecuted the new Gentiles believers and their leaders, and ultimately were responsible for Paul's death.

At that point to say ministry is messy minimizes the immeasurable damage that can come through unresolved conflict among Christians. But, if we can maintain a healthy acceptance of the messiness we each bring into Christian community and work together for healing and win/win resolution, the gospel can go forward and God's purposes are not damaged nor temporarily halted.

Cleaning the stable

That brings us to the primacy of cleaning the stalls of the stable so the oxen can do their work and help bring in an abundant harvest, as it says in Proverbs 14:4.

What's involved?

- an attitude of humility and vulnerability among the leadership and all those involved
- earnest seeking of God's wholeness for the whole community,
- confession, repentance and genuine restitution, when possible, on all sides (I John 1:5-2:3)
- forgiveness and restoration, as described in I Peter 5:8-11:

Be well balanced and always alert, because your enemy,^[a] the devil, roams around incessantly, like a roaring lion looking for its prey to devour.^[b]⁹ Take a decisive stand against him and resist his every attack with strong, vigorous faith. For you know that your believing brothers and sisters around the world are experiencing the same kinds of troubles you endure.^[c]¹⁰ And then, after your brief suffering,^[d] the God of all loving grace, who has called you to share in his eternal glory in Christ,^[e] will personally and powerfully restore you and make you stronger than ever. Yes, he will set you firmly in place and build you up.^[f]¹¹ And he has all the power needed to do this^[g]—forever!^[h] Amen.

God understands (though He surely laments over) all our messiness in ministry. But He has all power to deal with our messes, all power to produce an abundant harvest through us, all power to set us all firmly in place together and build us up, all power to clean the messes and strengthen us to live in terms of His loving grace with one another. That's the power and mercy we claim and praise God for day by day.

May we be like good oxen yoked together to one another and to Jesus to produce an abundant harvest and may we together look to God to help us clean up our messes. Amen.

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