

The Good News Is...For Protection and Care of the Vulnerable

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Matthew 19:13-15 and Deuteronomy 24:17-22

Many of you know that one of the many things my husband, Brian, does is keep bees and that we have a little business to sell the honey from those bees. Because Brian is also a teacher, he likes to give presentations to various groups about honeybees and beekeeping. Last week, he was giving a presentation about honeybees at the Wauwatosa Public Library and at the end of his talks he often offers people a few ideas about how they can support honeybees, one of which is to be a messy gardener. In a culture where tidy English gardens are the norm, we've made life harder for the honeybees and so many other insects and plant life, and if you want to change that, then it means allowing some weeds instead of spraying pesticides and leaving plants to decompose for the winter instead of cleaning it all up. Less efficiency, fewer bare garden beds, a bit more mess, goes a long way to promote biodiversity.

So, after the presentation as we were driving home, I was telling Brian about the scripture verses I was going to preach on this week and he said, "it sounds like God is a bit of messy gardener too." After laughing a bit, I thought about how true that actually is. All over scripture there are instructions to leave some of your crops unpicked or to let some of your fruit stay where it falls, so that people on the margins could come and take food. Jesus talks about scattering seed to the wind and letting the weeds grow up with your crops. God plays with dirt at the beginning of creation to form humans. It appears that God is not afraid of a mess.

Which is not the message we get about God very often. More often, we imagine God as serious, righteous in rule following, abiding by strict discipline, not coloring outside the lines. And, yes, there are rules and commandments laid out in scripture, though I would argue that they are more like guardrails to help us flourish in living together, but even with all those commandments, there are so many places where God chooses messiness over clean and clear discipline. It seems God's kingdom is a place where what the world calls weeds and nuisances and inconveniences are welcomed and given space to grow.

In today's first scripture, Jesus welcomes the children. Now, we all know that children can be messy. Not just with dirty hands and spills and such, but they add an element of chaos. They can be loud. They run away with their imaginations. They have a lot of questions. They are often uncomfortably honest. But, in Jesus' time, children represented something much more than that. Consider how difficult childhood was "in antiquity ... Fifty percent of children died before the age of five. They were the weakest

members of society. They were fed last and received the smallest and least desirable portions of food. They were the first to suffer from famine, war, disease, and natural disasters. Many, some say more than 70 percent, would have lost one or more parents before reaching puberty. A minor had the same status as an enslaved person, and it was not until adulthood that they would be considered a free person.” Children were the lowest rung on the social ladder. Far more than they should be seen and not heard, they weren’t even meant to be seen.

But, Jesus makes things messy by welcoming the children, and in doing so, he asks the disciples, who each held a certain level of privilege and status as adult males, to humble themselves to the status of a child. Think about how messy that is. Think about how people in our own time react to being humbled, being lumped in below what they think of as their status and privilege. It’s uncomfortable. It pushes all kinds of boundaries. It would at least make people squirm, if they didn’t react in anger.

So, it turns out, God is not just messy in the garden, God is messy in this way too: upsetting boundaries, making people squirm, challenging what we think of to be true. While we prefer to hold onto our piety and rules and order, God calls us to do the messy work of caring for the poor and vulnerable. Because it is almost always messy.

Let’s think about an example of this on a large scale first. I’ve been reading the book [You Only Get What You Are Organized To Take](#), by a co-founder of the Poor People’s Movement, Liz Theoharis. She lifts up the example of housing. A 2024 report found that in no state in the US can a minimum wage worker afford a modest two-bedroom rental — and yet sixteen million homes sit empty. The problem isn’t a lack of resources. It’s a lack of will. And that lack of will is, at its root, a choice to stay tidy rather than get messy.

Which then to consider the smaller scale of what it looks like to protect and care for the vulnerable we just have to think about the times we have walked by people in need and done nothing. In January, I served dinner at the Hospitality Center on one of those extremely cold nights we had. When we finished serving I went out to my car in the parking garage across the street and in the stairwell, there was a young woman setting up to spend the night, on the freezing cement. She looked at me and said, “have a good night” and I looked at her and said the same, and then awkwardly went to my car. I tried to figure out what I should do. Should I offer to bring her to my house? Should I offer to take her to a hotel? Should I just talk to her to see if she even wanted another option? Should I go home, get a bunch of blankets and bring them back to her? Caught up in my own shame and sadness, I did nothing. And now, I still think about her. All the options I thought of were messy. They felt like the kind of mess most of us try very hard to avoid — the kind that interrupts our plans, our safety, our sense of order. The kind of mess

that doesn't stay neatly in the garden bed but spills out into our lives. I didn't know her. I didn't know why she was in that position to begin with. Any interaction put me in a vulnerable position, though not nearly as vulnerable as hers. And ultimately, I chose to stay unmessy. As I have done before. As I imagine I will do again. As I imagine many of you have done too.

It turns out that protecting for and caring for the vulnerable and poor is messy. But, scripture shows us a God who prescribes this very messiness; a God who, every single time, puts caring for the vulnerable above discipline and fastidiousness and comfort. A God who says it is better to have some mess than to leave people out; better to have some waste than to let others go hungry.

If we aren't about protecting and caring for the vulnerable, then I'm not sure we can reasonably pretend we've read the Bible. If this work isn't at the core of what we do, then there really isn't a single book of the Bible we could say we've read and taken to heart. And thankfully, God has never waited for clean, qualified people to do that work. Just look at who God chose to bring the Messiah into the world."

"Abraham the patriarch who abandons his son, Ishmael, and twice endangers his wife's safety in order to save his own skin. Jacob, the trickster usurper who humiliates his older brother and his father-in-law. David, who sleeps with another man's wife and then orders that man's murder to protect his own reputation. Tamar, who pretends to be a sex worker, and Rahab, who is one. These are just a few representative samples. Notice anything? Anything like messiness? Complication? Scandal? Imperfection? How interesting that God, who is free to choose any genealogy for the Christ, chooses a long line of broken, imperfect, dishonorable, and scandalous people. The perfect backdrop, I suppose, for God's relentless work of restoration, healing and hope."<sup>1</sup>

It's perhaps why after all the law of the old testament, when asked what are the most important commandments, Jesus speaks the foundation of the Jewish faith - the shema - *'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'* The second is this: *'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* There is no other commandment greater than these."

Rather than launch into a long teaching with a list of intricate and detailed laws, Jesus gives us this as the guide for us to use when we ask ourselves hard questions about who

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<sup>1</sup> [Into the Mess and Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ](#), by Debie Thomas

we are and who we want to be in the world. To love God and our neighbor is both as hard, and as easy, as asking ourselves if our actions show love to God and love to our neighbor and then being willing to answer honestly. And ever more importantly, if or when the answer is no, then no matter how messy or hard or uncomfortable it is to change, we are called to do that.

So maybe the question for us this week is simple:

Where is God inviting us into a little more mess?

A conversation we'd rather avoid.

A person we'd rather walk past.

A problem we'd rather pretend is too complicated to touch.

Author Debie Thomas writes about how often scripture tells us "do not be afraid" because she says "if we want to enter into God's messy story, then perhaps these are the first words we need to hear, too. Do not be afraid. (Because what God is really saying is):

"Do not be afraid when God upends your cherished assumptions about piety and faithfulness. Do not be afraid when God asks you to stand alongside the scandalous, the defiled, the suspected, and the shamed. ...Do not be afraid of the precarious, the fragile, the vulnerable, the impossible.

Do not be afraid of the mess. Embrace it. The mess is where God enters the world."<sup>2</sup>

And that last part really resonates with me - "the mess is where God enters the world" because in my own life, the times I have experienced God the most clearly have been in messy situations; situations where I was willing to get my hands dirty or give up more of my comfort or did the thing that was harder. And often, when I've been willing to not only walk alongside the precarious, the fragile, the vulnerable, the scandalous, the shamed, the poor, but to see the ways I am also those descriptions, have been the times I've felt God's love most powerfully.

A messy garden doesn't happen by accident — it requires an intentional decision to let things grow differently than the neighbors expect. So, let's not be a church of tidy, disciplined, rule followers but a community of faith willing to get messy, to be messy, to find ways to embrace the mess. So, let's get the word out about the rental assistance fund we're starting, keep sending food to the Hospitality Center and the Food Pantry, and show up together to serve in our community. And when we see someone in need — let's stop. Let's talk to them. I'd rather people know us as the messy people who care for the vulnerable than as neat and tidy any day. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> [Into the Mess and Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ](#), by Debie Thomas