



GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

December 10, 2017

Discussion Guide No SHIRT. No SHOES. No PROBLEM.

CONNECTING:

45 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A WAY OF CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER SO THAT YOU MIGHT PARTNER IN THE WORK GOD IS DOING IN YOUR LIVES.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?
- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?
- HOW HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (GRACIOUSLY THANK GROUP MEMBERS FOR THEIR HONESTY IF THEY STATE THEY HAVE HELD BACK.)

GETTING STARTED:

10 MINUTES

- IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE, IS THERE A LEVEL OF MESSY THAT IS TOO MESSY? COULD YOU ELABORATE?

DIVING INTO THE TEXT:

60 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A SIMPLE ROAD MAP THROUGH THE TEXT. FEEL FREE TO USE THESE QUESTIONS IN WAYS THAT BEST FIT YOUR GROUP AND THE DYNAMICS OF YOUR OWN MEETING.)

- USING THE NOTES, TALK ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF GENEALOGIES IN SCRIPTURE.
- USING THE NOTES, DISCUSS THE POINT MATTHEW SEEMS TO BE TRYING TO MAKE WITH HIS GENEALOGY.
- SOME HAVE ARGUED THAT WITH HIS GENEALOGY, MATTHEW IS SAYING THAT GOD'S REDEMPTIVE

MOVEMENT IS ABOUT MAKING MESSY PEOPLE PART OF WHAT HE IS DOING. READ LUKE 2.1-15 AND MATTHEW 2.1-2 ALOUD. IN WHAT WAYS, IS THIS INTENTION OF GOD PART OF THESE CHRISTMAS NARRATIVES?

- WOULD YOU SAY THE PEOPLE OF GOD VIEW THIS INTENTION OF GOD AS POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE? WHY MIGHT YOU ANSWER IN THIS MANNER?
- READ LUKE 15.1-2 ALOUD. HOW DID THE PEOPLE OF GOD VIEW THIS REDEMPTIVE INTENTION OF GOD IN PRACTICE? DO YOU SEE SIMILAR RESPONSES AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE TODAY? WHY MIGHT THIS BE THE CASE?
- WHAT MIGHT IT TAKE FOR GOD'S PEOPLE TO VIEW GOD'S REDEMPTIVE INTENTION TO MAKE MESSY PEOPLE PART OF WHAT HE IS DOING IN A POSITIVE LIGHT? WHAT MIGHT IT TAKE FOR THEM TO JOIN HIM IN WHAT HE IS DOING? WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE TO LEAN INTO THESE AREAS WITH GOD?
- CONSIDER TAKING SOME TIME AS A GROUP TO MAKE ROOM FOR GOD WITH PRAYER, INVITING HIM INTO THE AREAS OF YOUR HEARTS WHICH NEED TO BE ADDRESSED.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

GENEALOGIES

THE KEEPING OF GENEALOGIES, THE TRACING OF KINSHIP LINES, WAS AN IMPORTANT PRACTICE FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE (1 CHRONICLES 1-9). WHILE THE PRACTICE OF CREATING GENEALOGIES WAS NOT FOREIGN TO ANCIENT NEAR-EASTERN CULTURES—THE SUMERIAN, ASSYRIAN, AND BABYLONIAN KINGS ALL KEPT EXTENSIVE GENEALOGIES—THE ANCIENT JEWS KEPT GENEALOGIES FOR THE COMMON PERSON, A UNIQUE

PRACTICE IN THAT CONTEXT. THE SPECIFIC REASONING BEHIND THIS PRACTICE HAS BEEN LOST, BUT WHEN ONE CONSIDERS THE VARIOUS GENEALOGIES FOUND IN THE OLD TESTAMENT (GENESIS, NUMBERS, 1 CHRONICLES, EZRA, NEHEMIAH, AND RUTH), AT LEAST THREE REASONS FOR THE PRACTICE CAN BE DEDUCED. GENEALOGIES APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN KEPT IN ORDER TO ENSURE THE RIGHTFUL POSSESSION OF LANDS, A PRACTICE WHICH MAKES SENSE BECAUSE LAND WAS GOD'S LASTING GIFT TO HIS PEOPLE. GENEALOGIES WERE KEPT TO TRACE BLOODLINES WHICH WERE IMPORTANT FOR CERTAIN ROLES LIKE THE PRIESTHOOD (EZRA 2.59-63; NEHEMIAH 7.61-65). FINALLY, GENEALOGIES HELPED THE JEWS MAINTAIN A SENSE OF ETHNIC AND CULTURAL HERITAGE AS A SPECIAL PEOPLE.

PEOPLE OFTEN CRITICIZE THE ANCIENT GENEALOGIES FOUND IN SCRIPTURE, NOTING THEY DO NOT HOLD UP TO MODERN HISTORICAL STANDARDS. HOWEVER, WITHIN THEIR DAY, THESE GENEALOGIES WERE CONSTRUCTED PROPERLY. ANCIENT GENEALOGIES WERE NEVER INTENDED TO PROVIDE AN "ACCURATE" LIST OF EVERY FAMILY MEMBER. GENEALOGIES WERE CONSTRUCTED TO MAKE A SPECIFIC POINT ABOUT A PERSON'S HERITAGE.

GENEALOGIES TRACED ONE'S HERITAGE THROUGH MALE HEADS OF FAMILY. HOWEVER, NOT EVERY MALE WAS IMPORTANT. THEREFORE, SOME NAMES FALL OUT OF GENEALOGIES BECAUSE THEY ARE UNRECOGNIZED OR UNIMPORTANT PEOPLE. ONE MIGHT EVEN LEAVE OUT A NAME BECAUSE IT REFERENCED AN INFAMOUS FAMILY MEMBER. THIS MIGHT BE DONE FOR SOCIAL OR POLITICAL REASONS. AS LONG AS THE LINE WAS KEPT IN-TACT WITH PROPER PRECEDING MALE HEADS, BY ANCIENT STANDARDS, THE GENEALOGY WAS CORRECT.

SECOND, GENEALOGIES WERE OFTEN ALTERED (CONDENSED) FOR MEMORIZATION PURPOSES. A GOOD EXAMPLE OF THIS IS MATTHEW'S GENEALOGY OF JESUS IN MATTHEW 1. THIS GENEALOGY MAKES USE OF THE NUMBER 14 AS A MEMORIZATION TOOL. HOWEVER, WHEN ONE COMPARES THIS GENEALOGY TO LUKE'S GENEALOGY (LUKE 3), ONE FINDS DIFFERENCES IN THE PROGRESSION OF THE NAMES, PARTICULARLY IN THE PERIOD OF THE EXILE. THESE DIFFERENCES ARE NOT MISTAKES BUT INDICATIONS OF THE INTENTIONAL SELECTION THAT WENT INTO CONSTRUCTING A GENEALOGY. LUKE'S SOURCE FOR HIS GENEALOGY WAS NOT CONCERNED WITH A MEMORIZATION DEVICE, AND SO DIFFERENT FAMILY HEADS WERE CHOSEN. HOWEVER, IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT, BOTH WERE CORRECT.

PERHAPS THE GREATEST EXAMPLE OF INTENTIONAL SELECTION USED TO CREATE A GENEALOGY IS SEEN IN THE INTENTIONAL INCLUSION OF WOMEN AND INFAMOUS RELATIVES IN

MATTHEW'S GENEALOGY. NO FEWER THAN FIVE WOMEN, EACH ASSOCIATED WITH SOME FORM OF SEXUAL INDECENCY, AND THE WORST KING IN THE HISTORY OF JUDAH (MANASSEH) ARE ALL INTENTIONALLY INCLUDED. CLEARLY, MATTHEW WAS SEEKING TO MAKE A POINT ABOUT THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF JESUS HE IS ABOUT TO RELATE IN THE WAY HE CONSTRUCTED THIS GENEALOGY AT THE BEGINNING OF HIS GOSPEL. THEREFORE, CARE SHOULD BE TAKEN WHEN CONSIDERING THE GENEALOGIES FOUND IN SCRIPTURE, BECAUSE UPON CAREFUL REFLECTION, INSIGHTS CAN BE GAINED INTO THE AUTHOR'S MEANING AND INTENT FOR THE LARGER PASSAGE.

THE TEXT

MATTHEW 1.1-17: *THE GOOD. THE BAD. THE UGLY.*

MATTHEW BEGINS HIS GOSPEL WITH A GENEALOGY TRACING THE LINEAGE OF JESUS BACK TO ABRAHAM, THE RECIPIENT OF GOD'S BLESSING AND PROMISE (GENESIS 12.1-3). THIS GENEALOGY IS CONSTRUCTED USING A MEMORIZATION DEVICE WHICH LIMITS THE GENERATIONS TO 14 ACROSS 3 SECTIONS, PUTTING KING DAVID AND THE EXILE AT THE CENTER OF THE GENEALOGY, BOTH KEY TURNING POINTS IN THE LIFE OF THE HEBREW PEOPLE. LIKE MOST ANCIENT GENEALOGIES, THE LINEAGE OF JESUS IS TRACED THROUGH MALE FAMILY HEADS. HOWEVER, UNLIKE MOST ANCIENT GENEALOGIES, NO FEWER THAN FIVE WOMEN ARE INCLUDED AS WELL AS AT LEAST ONE FAMILY MEMBER OF ILL-REPUTE.

THE FIRST WOMAN IS TAMAR, THE DAUGHTER-IN-LAW OF JUDAH, THE SON OF JACOB (MATTHEW 1.3). JUDAH GAVE TAMAR TO HIS SON ER, BUT ER DIED DUE TO HIS WICKEDNESS IN GOD'S SIGHT. THEREFORE, FOLLOWING THE PRACTICE OF LEVIRATE MARRIAGE, THE PRACTICE OF A BROTHER RAISING UP A SON IN HIS DECEASED BROTHER'S NAME, JUDAH GAVE TAMAR TO HIS SECOND SON ONAN. HOWEVER, ONAN REFUSED TO RAISE UP A SON IN ER'S NAME, A RELUCTANCE WHICH BROUGHT ABOUT HIS DEMISE. THE YOUNGEST SON OF JUDAH, SHELAH, WAS TOO YOUNG TO WED, SO HE WAS PROMISED TO TAMAR UPON HIS COMING OF AGE, BUT THIS NEVER TOOK PLACE. DESPERATE TO RAISE UP A SON, TAMAR DRESSED AS A PROSTITUTE AND SEDUCED HER FATHER-IN-LAW JUDAH SO THAT SHE MIGHT HAVE A CHILD (GENESIS 38).

THE SECOND WOMAN IS RAHAB (MATTHEW 1.5). RAHAB WAS A CITIZEN OF JERICHO, A PROSTITUTE BY TRADE. WHEN JOSHUA SENT SPIES TO JERICHO, THEY STAYED AT HER HOUSE. SANITIZED VERSIONS OF THIS STORY HAVE THE SPIES HIDING AT HER HOUSE TO AVOID THE AUTHORITIES. HOWEVER, THESE MEN CLEARLY DID A POOR JOB OF HIDING THEIR WHEREABOUTS (JOSHUA 2.2-3). IT IS MORE LIKELY THAT THESE MEN WERE VISITING RAHAB BECAUSE OF HER TRADE. HOWEVER, SHE PROTECTED THE SPIES AND WAS REWARDED WITH THE SPARING OF HER LIFE (JOSHUA 2).

THE THIRD WOMAN IS RUTH THE MOABITESS. RUTH WAS MARRIED TO THE SON OF AN ISRAELITE WHO HAD FLED A FAMINE WITH HIS FAMILY TO MOAB DURING THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES (RUTH 1). EVERY MALE IN THE FAMILY DIED LEAVING RUTH, HER SISTER-IN-LAW ORPAH, AND HER MOTHER-IN-LAW NAOMI TO FEND FOR THEMSELVES. RUTH RETURNED TO ISRAEL WITH NAOMI A FOREIGNER, UNWELCOMED ACCORDING TO GOD'S LAW. THE MOABITES WERE NOT TO BE WELCOMED INTO GOD'S PEOPLE FOR AT LEAST 10 GENERATIONS BECAUSE OF HOW THEY HAD TREATED THE ISRAELITES DURING THEIR WILDERNESS WANDERINGS (DEUTERONOMY 23.3). HOWEVER, SHE CAUGHT THE ATTENTION OF BOAZ, A KINSMAN REDEEMER AND LATER MARRIED HIM. HOWEVER, THE LANGUAGE OF THE TEXT (RUTH 3.8-14) SEEMS TO INDICATE THAT RUTH MAY HAVE SEDUCED BOAZ INTO HAVING SEXUAL RELATIONS WITH HER ON HIS THRESHING FLOOR WHICH MAY ACCOUNT FOR HIS WILLINGNESS TO REDEEM AND MARRY HER EVEN THOUGH SHE WAS A MOABITE. VERSE 8 IN PARTICULAR CAN BE READ AS RUTH INITIATING SEXUAL INTIMACY WITH A DRUNKEN BOAZ!

THE FOURTH WOMAN IS URIAH'S WIFE, BATHSHEBA. WHILE MENTIONED, HER NAME SEEMS TO BE SOMEWHAT OFFENSIVE AND THEREFORE SHE IS MENTIONED INDIRECTLY. HER NAME MIGHT HAVE BEEN CONSIDERED OFFENSIVE DURING MATTHEW'S TIME BECAUSE BATHSHEBA HAD AN ILLICIT AFFAIR WITH KING DAVID WHICH RESULTED IN AN UNPLANNED PREGNANCY WHICH LED TO THE MURDER OF BATHSHEBA'S HUSBAND, URIAH, BY DAVID (2 SAMUEL 11). HOWEVER, BATHSHEBA IS AT A MINIMUM A WILLFUL CONSPIRATOR IN THESE ACTIONS THROUGH HER SILENCE. THEREFORE, SHE IS NOT ONLY AN ADULTERER BUT A MURDERER.

THE FIFTH WOMAN IS MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS. MARY WAS A PEASANT WHO LIVED IN THE VILLAGE OF NAZARETH, A VILLAGE IN GALILEE, A HOTBED OF POLITICAL SEDITION AND RELIGIOUS IMPURITY AMONG THE COMMON PEOPLE. UPON THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE ANGEL GABRIEL, MARY BECAME PREGNANT WITH JESUS, BY THE HOLY SPIRIT, BEFORE SHE WAS MARRIED (LUKE 2). HOWEVER, THIS REALITY BROUGHT ABOUT THE ACCUSATION OF SEXUAL MISCONDUCT (MATTHEW 1.18-25), AN ACCUSATION WHICH SEEMS TO HAVE FOLLOWED JESUS THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE IN HIS HOMETOWN. IN NAZARETH PEOPLE CALLED HIM MARY'S SON, NOT JOSEPH'S SON. TO DO SO INDICATES THEY PERCEIVED HIS BIRTH TO BE ILLEGITIMATE (MARK 6.1-4).

INTERESTINGLY, THE COMMON THREAD TYING EACH OF THESE WOMEN TOGETHER IS THE THREAD OF SEXUAL IMMORALITY,

EITHER THE ACCUSATION OR THE ACTUAL PRACTICE. SEXUAL IMMORALITY WAS UNDERSTOOD TO BE A SERIOUS SIN WITHIN JEWISH SOCIETY. IN THE MALE-DOMINATED WORLD, THE UNFAITHFULNESS OF A WOMAN WAS UNDERSTOOD TO BE AN INSULT OF THE HIGHEST ORDER TO HER HUSBAND. FURTHER, WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE JEWISH FAITH, SEXUAL IMMORALITY STOOD AGAINST GOD'S CREATIVE INTENTIONS FOR PEOPLE, INTENTIONS WHICH INCLUDED THE GIVING OF SEX AS A MEANS OF HELPING PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THE UNION GOD DESIRED WITH HIS PEOPLE. IF SEXUAL MISCONDUCT WAS NOT ENOUGH, THESE WOMEN ALSO BEAR THE BURDENS OF BEING FOREIGNERS AND WIDOWS, WITH MURDER THROWN IN FOR GOOD MEASURE. HOWEVER, THEY ARE PART OF JESUS' LINEAGE, INTENTIONALLY INCLUDED. THE REASON FOR THEIR INCLUSION MAY BECOME CLEAR WHEN ONE CONSIDERS THE INCLUSION OF KING MANASSEH (MATTHEW 1.10).

MANASSEH WAS KING OF JUDAH FOR 55 YEARS, AND PERHAPS THE SINGLE WORST KING IN THE HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE. HE WAS SO WICKED THAT HE NOT ONLY REVERSED THE SPIRITUAL GOOD DONE BY HIS FATHER HEZEKIAH, BUT HE LED THE PEOPLE OF JUDAH SO FAR ASTRAY THAT HIS LEADERSHIP TIPPED THE SCALES OF JUSTICE MOVING GOD TO SEND THE PEOPLE OF JUDAH INTO BABYLONIAN EXILE (2 KINGS 21.1-18). IF ONE WAS SEEKING TO CONSTRUCT A GENEALOGY WHICH POINTED TO A SPIRITUAL OR KINGLY PEDIGREE, MANASSEH IS ONE NAME TO LEAVE OUT. HOWEVER, HE WAS INCLUDED, ON PURPOSE.

IT APPEARS THAT MATTHEW CONSTRUCTED THIS GENEALOGY AND PLACED IT AT THE BEGINNING OF HIS GOSPEL TO MAKE A POINT. WHAT POINT? WITH THE INCLUSION OF THESE 6 CHARACTERS, ONE STRONG POSSIBILITY IS THAT MATTHEW WAS TRYING TO SAY THAT JESUS AND HIS MINISTRY WAS ABOUT INCLUDING THOSE WHO WOULD OTHERWISE BE LEFT OUT BECAUSE OF THEIR IDENTITY OR ACTION. THIS IS A TRUTH WHICH READILY BECAME CLEAR IN JESUS' BIRTH (LUKE 2.8; MATTHEW 2.1) AND HIS MINISTRY (MATTHEW 9.9-13; LUKE 15). HOWEVER, THIS MOVEMENT TO INCLUDE THOSE OTHERWISE EXCLUDED WAS DIFFICULT TO ACCEPT, PARTICULARLY BY THOSE WHO WERE RELIGIOUS (LUKE 15; MATTHEW 9.9-13). MATTHEW WAS ONE OF THOSE INCLUDED BY JESUS, AND HE MAY HAVE SOUGHT TO HAND OFF THIS GOSPEL-TRUTH TO THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH WHICH HE LED.

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

CHRISTMAS IS THE GOSPEL. CHRISTMAS IS THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT. THAT SOUNDS GOOD, UNTIL I BEGIN TO EXPERIENCE ITS REALITIES. ONE OF THE MOST PAINFUL OF THESE REALITIES IS THE INCLUSION OF THE OUTCAST. JESUS CAME TO INCLUDE THE OUTCAST. CHRISTMAS MARKED THE

BEGINNING OF THAT MOVEMENT. IT IS HARD TO MISS THAT THIS IS PART OF WHAT GOD INTENDED TO DO AS SHEPHERDS AND MAGI ARE SOME OF THE FIRST TO BEAR WITNESS TO CHRIST'S BIRTH. WE HAVE A SANITIZED VERSION OF MAGI AND SHEPHERDS BECAUSE WE ARE SEPARATED BY 2,000 YEARS OF HISTORY. THINK OF IT THIS WAY. IF JESUS WAS TO BE BORN TODAY, THE ANGEL WOULD HAVE ANNOUNCED HIS BIRTH TO A GATHERING OF THE CRIPS AND TAROT CARD READERS WHO WOULD HAVE BEEN THE FIRST TO BRING HIM GIFTS. AGAIN, THAT SOUNDS OK, UNTIL YOU REALIZE THAT THEY STAYED CRIPS AND TAROT CARD READERS. THAT'S THE POINT MATTHEW MADE IN HIS GENEALOGY OF JESUS. WITH CHRISTMAS, GOD WAS ABOUT INCLUDING MESSY PEOPLE, AND HE WASN'T WORRIED ABOUT THEM STAYING MESSY PEOPLE. THIS REALITY SHOWED UP IN JESUS' MINISTRY. JESUS HAD A BAD HABIT OF WELCOMING PEOPLE OF BAD CHARACTER AND REPUTATION AND MAKING THEM FAMILY (MATTHEW 9.9-13), AND AT LEAST IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE, THEY STAYED PEOPLE OF BAD CHARACTER AND REPUTATION. IT IS HERE THAT THE PROBLEM LIES. YOU SEE, IF THIS IS WHAT JESUS IS ABOUT, THEN IT IS WHAT THE GOSPEL IS ABOUT. IT IS WHAT I AM TO BE ABOUT, AND I DON'T KNOW IF I WANT TO BE ABOUT THAT.

I AM ALL ABOUT PEOPLE FAR FROM GOD COMING NEAR TO GOD. I JUST WANT THEM TO CLEAN UP FIRST. I AM NOT ALL THAT COMFORTABLE WITH MESS. NOT ONLY AM I NOT COMFORTABLE WITH MESS, BUT WHEN YOU INVITE MESS TO BE FAMILY, YOU INTENTIONALLY COMMIT YOURSELF TO BEING PART OF THE MESS IN A VERY REAL WAY. LET ME BRING THIS INTO REAL LIFE. IN MY FAMILY, WE HAVE SEVERAL PEOPLE FROM THE LGBT COMMUNITY. ONE RECENTLY DECIDED TO GET MARRIED, AND THEY SENT US AN INVITATION. QUICK. WHAT DO YOU DO? THE COMMON RESPONSE AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE IS TO SAY, "I CAN'T GO. IT WOULD CONDONE IT." HOWEVER, WHEN I LOOK AT THE TRAJECTORY OF GOD'S PURPOSES IN THE MISSION AND MINISTRY OF JESUS, I DON'T SEE HOW THAT CAN BE THE ANSWER. JESUS DREW NEAR TO MESSY PEOPLE AND MADE THEM FAMILY AND COMMITTED HIMSELF TO THEIR MESS. YOU DO THE MATH ANY WAY AND IT ISN'T COMFORTABLE. IT BECOMES INCREASINGLY UNCOMFORTABLE WHEN THE MESSY PERSON IS THE REFUGEE, THE CRIMINAL, THE ENEMY. WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO WELCOME THESE PEOPLE TO OUR TABLE, INTO OUR FAMILY AND COMMIT TO THEIR MESS? LET'S GO A STEP FURTHER. WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO CELEBRATE THAT THIS IS THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS? YIKES! IT IS HARD ENOUGH TO IMAGINE DOING IT BEGRUDGINGLY, BUT TO CELEBRATE THAT THIS IS WONDERFUL, SOMETHING GOD CAME TO DO? SOMEDAYS I CAN'T EVEN BEGIN TO WRAP MY MIND AROUND IT.

I THINK THE HOPE I FIND IS IN THE GOSPELS, PARTICULARLY IN JESUS' PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON. IN THIS PARABLE, THE SON WHO STAYED HOME ACTS LIKE HIM. HE STRUGGLES WITH WELCOMING MESS INTO THE FAMILY, BUT THE INVITATION OF THE FATHER IS GIVEN TO HIM. THE FATHER LOVES HIM AND DOESN'T GIVE UP ON HIM, BUT LOVINGLY

INVITES HIM INTO WHAT HE IS DOING AND THE STORY ENDS. IN THIS THERE IS HOPE, BECAUSE I AM THAT SON AND MY STORY IS NOT YET WRITTEN. BY GOD'S GRACE, IT CAN STILL TURN OUT WELL.

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

AT CHRISTMAS, WE CELEBRATE THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL, THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT. BUT WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE CELEBRATING? WITH THE GENEALOGY IN MATTHEW, WE SEE THAT WE ARE CELEBRATING GOD'S DESIRE TO BEGIN BRINGING PEOPLE FAR FROM HIM, MESSY PEOPLE CLOSE TO MAKE THEM FAMILY. YAY! PEOPLE FAR FROM GOD CAN COME NEAR. REJOICE. . . UNLESS YOU ARE ONE OF THE FAMILY MEMBERS ALREADY SITTING AT GOD'S TABLE. WHEN THIS IS WHO YOU ARE, IT BECOMES QUICKLY APPARENT THAT WHEN GOD BRINGS MESSY PEOPLE NEAR TO BE FAMILY, HE BRINGS THEM AS THEY ARE, MESSY, AND WE ARE NOW ALL FAMILY. ONE BIG, NOT SO HAPPY, MESSY FAMILY. YOU SEE, TO BE FAMILY MEANS I BEAR RESPONSIBILITY IN REAL WAYS TO MY FAMILY MEMBERS, EVEN MY MESSY FAMILY MEMBERS. THAT SOUNDS FINE IN THEORY. IT IS HARDER IN PRACTICE BECAUSE TO DEAL WITH MESS PUTS AN END TO THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE MESSY PERSON BROUGHT NEAR IS PART OF THE LGBT COMMUNITY? WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE MESSY PERSON BROUGHT NEAR IS A REFUGEE OR ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT? WHAT HAPPENS IF THE MESSY PERSON BROUGHT NEAR IS AN OFFENDER OR OUR ENEMY? SUDDENLY OUR WORLD CHANGES. OUR COMFORT, FINANCIAL AND MATERIAL RESOURCES, OUR ATTENTION, OUR REPUTATION AND SO MUCH MORE ALL ARE BROUGHT TO BEAR IN REACHING TO FAMILY AND THIS IS HARD BECAUSE WE DON'T LIKE TO SHARE. WE ARE HAPPY TO HAVE PEOPLE AT THE TABLE SO LONG AS WE DON'T HAVE TO GIVE UP WHAT WE ALREADY HAVE. TO SHARE IS HARD ENOUGH. TO CELEBRATE HAVING TO SHARE IS ANOTHER STORY ENTIRELY. HOW DO WE GET TO THE POINT THAT CHRISTMAS IS A CELEBRATION OF MESSY PEOPLE COMING TO OUR TABLE TO BE FAMILY, FORCING US TO SHARE WHAT IS ON THE TABLE? WE DON'T DO IT WITH GRIT. WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH. WE DO IT BY MOVING THROUGH ADVENT. WE DO IT BY HEARING THE COMFORTING CALL OF GOD WHICH TELLS US WE ARE CARED FOR BUT HE IS HEADED OUT TO WILDERNESS PLACES TO FIND THOSE WHO LIVE THERE. WE ARE NOT FORGOTTEN. WE HAVE WHAT WE NEED BUT WE ARE PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER (ISAIAH 40.1-5). THIS WEEK, CONSIDER PONDERING ISAIAH 40.1-5, CONSIDER MAKING SPACE FOR GOD TO AFFIRM THAT HE HAS CARED FOR YOU AND THAT BECAUSE WE HAVE WHAT WE NEED WE CAN MAKE ROOM AT THE TABLE.



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