

On any given Sunday morning or Wednesday evening during Open Prayer or Bible Study times, a diverse group of people gather to explore the Word of God in Huntington Center. Our most common traits are that we are all in different places on our faith journey, each of us is a work-in-progress because each of us is flawed, and every single one of us is looking to have a more personal relationship with Jesus. Our backgrounds include those raised in Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, devout, and non-believing families. We are generational Vermonters, flatlanders, and immigrants. We are Democrats, Republicans, Independents, and all over the map in our differing political viewpoints. We remain in community together and welcome others even though we may have contradictory interpretations of specific parts of scripture. And we agree that it's okay to disagree with one another and still pray and worship together in unity. And we are, no doubt, as messy as or messier than the early disciples who followed Jesus.

It's easy to get along with people who think just like us. It's easy to like people who agree with us on all the big issues. It's easy to be in harmony when there are no conflicts over what we think is okay and not okay. It's easy to forgive those who are willing to change their current belief system to match what we ourselves think is "the right way" to believe or think or act. But that's not who we are. And it's not who Jesus challenges us to be.

The disciples of Jesus were messy. They argued – even about who among them Jesus loved the most. They came from wildly differing backgrounds: fishermen, tax collectors, anti-Roman zealots. They had doubts. (Remember "Doubting Thomas" who refused to believe eyewitness accounts from his fellow disciples of the resurrected Jesus until he, himself, was a direct witness?) They could be impulsive, quick-tempered, prideful, and competitive. They had heated theological debates and formed inner circles. And yet, Jesus didn't give up on them. Instead, He accepted them wherever they were on their human journeys, He taught them, and He challenged them to change, to be better, to be more accepting, and to care for "the least of these" (Matthew 25:31-46).

Perhaps what I treasure most about being in community with my Church Family is that I am constantly learning to care for, pray with, and love people with whom I have differences. It makes me work harder to find and build on our areas of commonality rather than to give up when we disagree in order to surround myself with those who think, feel, believe and act like me. Is it sometimes hard? Yes. Is it sometimes messy? Yes, very messy. Is it worth the work? Most assuredly. It is a wondrous act of mercy and grace that God uses our messy lives—our differences, struggles, and failings—to strengthen the body of Christ.