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Life is messy, though many times we try to keep it from looking like a mess, as was the case with a couple who decided to hire a cleaning service to help with their housework.

They went to an agency and hired a woman to come in once a week to clean. She was scheduled to come for the first time the following Friday.

On Thursday the husband came home unexpectedly in the middle of the day to pick up some papers he had forgotten and found his wife home early from work, dressed in her oldest cleaning clothes, surrounded by mops, buckets, sponges, rags, and a lot of spray bottles. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Well, the new cleaning lady is coming tomorrow,” she replied, “and I couldn’t stand to have her see the house a mess.”¹

Besides what our homes might look like, life is often filled with many other messy situations. Relationships that we hoped would last forever fall apart in painful breakups. Finances that we hope will sustain us seem to disappear with mounting stacks of bills. Children who we lovingly welcome into the world try our patience as they become

toddlers. A friend who promises to be your BFF betrays you with painful deceit. Those we love unexpectedly die without warning. Situations we never imagined we would face suddenly appear before our eyes.

In the first two chapters of the book of Ruth, we heard in previous weeks about the messiness of Naomi’s life: famine and lack of crops, moving to a rival nation to find food, and her husband and two married sons died, leaving her a widow in a strange land. A glimmer of hope appeared in the story as the famine ended and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, offered to go back home with her to Bethlehem, and there Ruth found hospitality in the fields of Boaz, a relative of Naomi. The landowner protected Ruth and let her glean barley from his fields so Ruth and Naomi could survive.

In the third chapter of this story, their situation turns once again, but in a round-about, messy sort of way, for Naomi decided to play the role of a matchmaker for Ruth and Boaz, suggesting actions that seem...well, rather scandalous and shocking.

We may find the idea of matchmaking a bit odd today, for we leave it to young adults to navigate through their own discernment process of selecting a partner. Surprisingly, arranged marriages still exist today, with 50% of marriages in the world happening through parents deciding on their children's spouses.² We may wonder if those marriages will last, but according to a recent study, "the global divorce rate for arranged marriages was 6 percent,"³ which is much lower than the 40% to 50% divorce rate in the U.S.

Here in the U.S. we may not practice arranged marriages, but life would be a lot less messy if we had a way of knowing whether relationships would last, as portrayed

in a 1970s flashback scene on an episode of *The Simpsons*, [when] Professor Frink...is showing off his new computer. Flashing lights and reel-to-reel tapes fill an entire wall behind him. All who have come to see this new technology are thoroughly impressed with this great machine.

Frink tries to temper their enthusiasm by telling them what computers will be like one day. "Within a hundred years," he predicts,

"computers will be twice as powerful, 10,000 times larger and so expensive that only the five richest kings of Europe will own them."

Then, just when you think he couldn't be more wrong, a member of the crowd asks if his computer could be used for dating.

"Well, theoretically, yes," Frink replies, "but the computer matches would be so perfect as to eliminate the thrill of romantic conquest."⁴

Even in our computerized world, life and dating are still unpredictable, messy, and filled with uncertainty. Ruth had no computerized dating service two thousand years ago, but she had Naomi who devised a plot to match her with Boaz, Naomi's relative who had showed kindness to Ruth in the barley fields.

Naomi instructs Ruth to wash, put on perfume and her best clothes, and to head down to where Boaz would be threshing the barley. She's to wait, hidden in secret, until everyone has gone home except for Boaz, who will remain there overnight to protect the harvest. Naomi tells Ruth to observe where Boaz lays down to sleep, and then, in the middle of the night, to lie down next to him.

Through subtle clues, the narrator hints at possible intimate encounters, but when Boaz awoke, he was surprised to find a woman sleeping next to him. She appealed to an ancient law that required a man to marry the widow of a deceased brother in order to provide her care, but Boaz suggests that there might be closer kin to fulfill the obligation, whom they would search for the next day. Ruth stayed the rest of the evening anyway, but knowing their encounter was scandalous, Boaz sent her home before the morning light, along with more barley for her and Naomi.

Some might not approve of their encounter, for it went against the rules. It was not appropriate for an unmarried man and woman to spend the night together on the threshing floor of the barn. “Why is this story even in the Bible?” some may wonder.

One writer has suggested that we view the Bible in another way:

For some reason, it has become popular to make the Bible squeaky clean. We read it like a rule book or a book of saintly examples for us to emulate. But the Bible is neither of those.

When I stopped reading the Bible as a book of laws or a puzzle to be solved, and when I started reading it as a storybook filled with people just like me who struggled to figure it all out—it was then that I fell in love with the Bible for the first time.⁵

You see, the Bible is filled with people whose lives are messy, who struggle to understand what God has called them to do. The lives of those who fill the pages of the Bible make mistakes, run away, deny God, argue with God, and feel inadequate for what God has asked them to do. In other words, they are a lot like you and me. They’re not perfect role models with larger-than-life faith, but they were ones God continued to love and empower to bring change to the world in the midst of their shortcomings. Without the tawdry encounter of Ruth and Boaz, you and I might not be sitting here this morning, but that’s getting ahead of the story we’ll hear next week (in two weeks).

One blogger reflected on his own messy life and offered a suggestion on how to respond to our own messiness:

Pick a spot. Any spot. Jump in and make that part of the world a little better. Yep, you'll have your heartbroken a million times. That's just part of it. Love is messy. Life is messy.

One of the reasons people have such a hard time believing in the Incarnation [of Jesus] is people don't believe God would be willing to get that dirty just to love us. Why would God, enthroned in splendor...walk barefooted in the dust of Galilee? Why would this great God, maker of heaven and earth, risk such painful disappointment by loving the disciples? And why would [God] suffer the indignities and pain of the cross for a world as messed up as ours? Because Jesus knows life is messy.⁶

God knows the messiness of life because God experienced it through the life of Jesus. God saw how humans, who tried to follow God's ways, would stumble and fall. God felt the pains and sorrows of

humanity, and in response, Jesus offered us a gift: forgiveness and the chance to begin again each day.

As Linus says in the Peanuts comic strip: "My life is like a coloring book! Each day I have a new page with new pictures to color. Being very careful, of course, to stay inside the lines." Linus seems to understand the idea that God gives us a new chance every day, offering forgiveness and a new beginning as we strive to follow God's Way. After diligent coloring in his book, Linus admits, "My life is like a messy coloring book."

When you find yourself coloring outside the lines, when your life is in a mess, trust that God continues to love you and gives you a new page each day.

¹ Hodgin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 3050-3055). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #446.

² Sarah-Louise Kearney, "Over 50% of World Marriages are Arranged say New Statistics," www.desiblitiz.com/content/world-marriages-arranged-statistics

³ <http://thedailycougar.com/2015/04/03/arranged-marriages-theyre-not-as-unfortunate-as-you-think/>

⁴ *Homiletics Online*, 11-8-2015.

⁵ *Clergy Stuff*, Summer 2018 Resources, p.87.

⁶ Mike Glenn, "Life Is Messy," 5-18-18, www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/05/18/life-is-messy/