

The Messiness of Love
2 Corinthians 2:1-4
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Having done my doctoral work on systems theory I have had my internal radar set to scan for the unspoken assumptions that exist in human systems like families, churches, and groups. What is it that most people know about a group's life but that some don't? For example, many churches don't look at their worship practices through the eyes of an unchurched newcomer. They assume that everyone knows the Lord's Prayer. They assume that everyone knows how to take communion. Some people don't wear name tags because they assume everyone knows who they are.

Churches who practice radical hospitality understand the importance of eliminating the assumptions. They don't assume everyone knows where the nursery is and find ways to let new people know this information with good signage. They don't assume everyone knows how to find coffee after the service and train their people to take visitors to the fellowship area and introduce them to others. Churches take steps towards being a healthy system when they move the silent assumptions into the open, where all understand, not just a privileged few.

Some churches operate like a salmon stream. Newcomers are expected to find them, swim upstream, against the current to belong to a church. Many churches don't think about how their church system has to change to welcome and accept new people. They just assume the new people will make the changes to fit in.

What silent and perhaps wrong assumptions are you making in your family, work, or church system? In some families children know not to irritate dad when he is in a bad mood. No one talks about this. It is a hidden rule. Remember that systems take a step towards health when they make clear and open what had been previously hidden and unspoken.

In their book *Sacred Bull: The Inner Obstacles That Hold You Back at Work and How to Overcome Them* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), Albert J. Bernstein and Sydney Craft Rozen list these ten Sacred Bulls as the key assumptions we live by that are wrong for the new world. As I go down this list see if you live by any of these assumptions. Do they exist in your workplace?

1. Denial: I don't see the problem so it isn't there.
2. Blind Spots and Shortcuts: What I don't like can't be important.
3. Self-Interest: Always look out for Number One.
4. Mind Reading: People should know what I want without being told.
5. Blame: If something goes wrong, it has to be somebody's fault.
6. Being Nice: Avoid conflict at all cost.
7. Perfection: If it's not perfect, it's nothing.
8. Fairness: I don't need to negotiate for what I want; I just want fairness.
9. Excuses: There's always a good reason why I don't follow the rules everyone else works by.
10. Being Right: There's a right way and a wrong way; my way is right.

There are assumptions people make about God as well. These assumptions or myths become embedded in our culture. One of the myths about God many Americans believe is that if we do such and such, God will protect us and give us prosperity. If we live a righteous life God will bless us with health. If we pray God will answer our prayers.

The assumption or myth that I want to focus on today is this. Many people believe that if they go to church, if they give generously to God, if they live by God's Word, if they do the right things that somehow life will work out the way they had planned.

A couple I know had a teenager daughter who experienced a bout with anorexia. They were a devout Christian family and the parents were caught by surprise. The mother said, "I don't understand. We have done all the right things. Why is this happening to us?"

What's the assumption behind this question? It's really a theological trap. Have you ever been tempted to think that bad things don't happen to religious people who do the right things? Let's be clear. Good things do happen to people of faith. But our faith does not insulate us from difficulties or suffering. Our faith gives us the strength to endure hardship.

Many of us could use a good dose of reality when it comes to how we view love. We have this tendency to romanticize love. This shows up in the lyrics of our songs all the time. For example, here's an Elvis Presley song, "Let It Be Me."
God bless the day I found you. I want to stay around you. And so I beg you Let it be me. Don't take this heaven from one. If you must cling to someone, Now and forever Let it be me. Each time we meet love, I find complete love Without your sweet love Tell me, what would life be? So never leave me lonely Tell me you love me only And that you'll always Let it be me.

Do we truly believe that true love is a clinging love? Do we really believe that human love can remove all loneliness in our lives? It seems so innocent but in subtle ways such lyrics are part of a larger cultural myth about love. This is not God-love. And people who believe this stuff need a reality check.

One of the places we find a reality check is the Bible where we learn not to idealize love but get a picture of the messiness of love. Apparently Paul was wronged by someone in the Corinthian church. He wrote, "I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you." Paul understands that love is messy. He also wrote some popular words about love in 1 Corinthians 13. These words have been idealized by many over the years. We hear these idealistic words that "love is not jealous or boastful or proud" at weddings all the time. When was the last wedding where you heard that love was distressing and tearful and painful?

What are the potential pitfalls for people who don't think through the messiness of love? They may start a romantic relationship without thinking through if they have the time or money. They may join a church thinking that the pastor is going to be their new best friend. They may enter prematurely into a marriage with an idealistic expectation how they are going to get their needs met by this spouse.

Such was likely the case with the founder of Methodism, John Wesley. Did you know that Wesley married a widow, Mrs. Mary Vazeille, when he was 48? Many of

Wesley's closest colleagues, including his brother, Charles, opposed this marriage. Mary and John did not have a realistic view about how this powerful new Methodist movement would impact their relationship. But the marriage was a disaster, and Mary finally left John.

Had Wesley consulted with his brother Charles, and asked for the prayers of fellow Christians, he might have avoided that unfortunate situation. Mary was accustomed to her quiet home, and it was difficult for her to travel with her husband and stay in uncomfortable inns. It is unfortunate that Mary was not content just to ignore John's ministry; she actually opposed it. Once she even pulled her husband around on the floor by his hair! " I felt as though I could have knocked the soul out of her!" one of Wesley's friends said. Wesley concluded that his unhappy marriage encouraged him to work harder and not complain about missing the comforts of a home. Certainly it encouraged him to be away from home more! ¹

The main point of this message is to encourage us to realize that love will be messy. It will hurt. And it will not be easy. Perhaps if we all had this kind of reality check we might make better decisions about how we love others.

Elie Wiesel tells the story of a peasant woman by the name of Maria. Maria was almost like a member of the family. She was a Christian. During the early years of the war she continued to visit them, but eventually non-Jews were no longer allowed entrance to the ghettos. That did not deter Maria. She found her way through the barbed wire and she came anyway, bringing the Wiesels fruits, vegetables, and cheese.

I think of Maria often, with affection and gratitude, he writes, and with wonder as well. This simple, uneducated woman stood taller than the city's intellectuals, dignitaries and clergy. My father had many acquaintances and even friends in the Christian community, not one of them showed the strength of character of this peasant woman. Of what value was their faith, their education, their social position, if it did not arouse their love. It was a simple and devout Christian woman who saved the town's honor.

May we learn today how real and messy love can be, so that when the time comes tomorrow to put this messy and risk-taking love into action, we will know what lies ahead and we will be found faithful.

¹ W. Wiersbe, Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching and Preachers, Moody Press, 1984, p. 246.