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Usually, when a child has his or her first birthday, mom and dad place in front of them a cake and let them go at it. Friends and relatives stand by, with video recorders rolling, cameras snapping...the messier the child gets with chocolate smeared all over the face and in the ears and hair, the more delighted the friends and relatives are. Sometimes they even cheer the child on, to keep digging in, to keep smearing, to keep up the good work of making a terrible mess of everything.

The child doesn't get away with this for long. Soon after that, into the toddler and childhood years, those same friends and relatives criticize the child whenever he or she makes a mess. You would never go to a restaurant and see an 8-year-old child smearing cake all over this face, while friends and relatives stand by taking pictures and making video recordings. Big messes like that of a first birthday are only bearable for so long, and after

that, it's time to start learning what it means to stay tidy and keep clean. Or at the very least, try to stay tidy and keep clean.

Long ago, this same phenomenon happened in the church.

When the Christian church first got started after Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven, things were messy. The church was an infant, trying to figure out how to survive, even if it was messy. The early church wrestled with things we take for granted...who gets to preach? How is Holy Communion supposed to work? Whom does the church baptize and whom does it not? Where does the money go that's collected every Sunday? And on and on and on. Much of the New Testament addresses these messy questions, as the church takes its first steps as a tiny, young child.

As the centuries passed, messes within the church became tolerated less and less. The church was older now, and ought to know better than to be so messy. And so the church became rigid and strict, and clamped down on

its members, so that there might be nice, neat, tidy order in God's house.

Dogma was established, that is to say, the church formulated confessions and creeds that members had to adhere to, for the sake of their souls.

Purgatory was invented to scare the hell not out of but into members.

Sacraments abounded, so that the church was able to control every aspect of every person who was striving to be a good and pious Christian. Worship

services were offered in Latin, even though the people didn't understand

Latin, because it was the language of the scholars and academics. Hymns

were difficult to follow, and their melodies were obscure, and so the people

never sang. The chalice of wine was taken away from the people during

Holy Communion, so that they didn't spill a single drop onto the floor, or

God forbid, a drop should drip into a man's beard. By the time the Middle

Ages rolled around, church had less to do with faith and more to do with

fear, fear of hell and even worse fear of God.

This order might sound appealing, at least, at first. After all, fear controls people and controlled people easily fall into line, and there is structure and organization. But there was one thing that the church failed to remember, and that is that *God never intended the church to be nice and neat and tidy and perfectly ordered.*

And that's precisely the moment when God threw Martin Luther at the world.

Things had gone too far, and the ornate, bureaucratic medieval church resembled nothing of the messy, infant church that had once been. To go back to the first birthday analogy, the medieval church had not only taken the birthday cake away from the child, but they had moved it all the way across the room and wrapped it in plastic, never to be touched by the germ, sticky fingers of a child. *Look at the cake, but never, ever touch it. It's a beautiful cake, isn't it? But it's not for you. All you can do is look at it.*

Martin Luther was a fiery man, with a quick tongue and an aggressive disposition. He was brilliant, he was charismatic, and he loved the church and he hated what had happened to it. And so he began to work, in order to bring about changes that could restore the church to her authentic identity—and that is, an structure that exists precisely for the messy people of the world. He pointed to Jesus, and then translated the Bible into German so that the people could read for themselves that even Jesus surrounded himself with messy people—prostitutes and lepers and people frothing at the mouth because they were possessed by evil spirits...blind people, sick people, people who couldn't walk or talk, people whom the rest of the world had kicked into the gutter because they were disgusting, messy people.

The medieval church claimed to minister to these messy people, but only by preaching to them through a window or from a very high pulpit so that the clergy wouldn't get coughed on...and only when incense was used

to mask the horrible odor and stench that comes from unwashed, diseased and malnourished bodies...and only when they could preach and read Scripture in a language the crowd wouldn't understand, so that the crowd couldn't challenge them...and only when the church could scare these messy people into giving them money they didn't have so that St. Peter's basilica could be built, where the messy people would never, ever even be allowed to enter. No, shouted Luther, no! Give the church back to the people! Give the cake back to the child!

And so he did.

Luther translated the Bible into German for the people, so that they could hear and read the Bible for themselves for the very first time! Luther put sacred church hymns to the tunes of popular beer-drinking songs, so that the people would leave church humming the music under their breaths.

Luther preached to them in their own language, in their own dialect, so they

could understand his message of Jesus' love. Luther gave the chalice of wine back to the people, insisting that even if a drop is spilled here or there, Jesus still shed his blood for real people, even the messy ones. He did a thousand other things which helped give the church back to the common, ordinary, messy people, who for so long had lived in fear of God and hatred of themselves.

And Luther's work continues into our present day. We know our church services are messy and loud! We know our body of Christ sometimes tumbles off the plate and rolls onto the floor! We know our churches are hot and sometimes we don't smell as sweetly as we could! We know we are not opera-quality singers, and I know I am far from the best preacher in the world. We know we make terrible mistakes in life, we know we lead anything but clean and tidy lives... We know we are corrupt and broken people, unworthy of Jesus' love. We know we are that child in that chair

with life smeared all over our faces and in our hair, and we know it's not
cute anymore and that we should know better than to make such a mess in
life, but we just can't seem to help it...yet we also know God is our adoring
Father, who also knows we are messy people, inside and out, and who loves
us despite the terrible messes we make, because he knows it only takes a
little water to turn the messiest child into one who is spotlessly clean.