

*Communion under
Special Circumstances*

THE SHACK

Brothers and sisters in Christ,
God calls us to faithful service
by the proclamation of the word,
and sustains us with the sacrament
of the body and blood of Christ.
[*Hear now God's word,*
and] receive this holy food from the Lord's
table.

Most merciful God,
**we confess that we have sinned against
you
in thought,
word, and deed,
by what we
have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole
heart;
we have not loved our neighbours as
ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly
repent.
For the sake of your Son
Jesus Christ, have mercy
on us and forgive us, that
we may delight in your
will, and walk in your
ways,
to the glory of your name. Amen.**

The priest shall say...

Almighty God have mercy upon
you, pardon and deliver you from

all your sins, confirm and
strengthen you in all
goodness, and keep you in eternal
life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Before Communion...

As our Saviour taught us, let us pray,

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.**

The gifts of God for the People of God.
Thanks be to God.

After Communion...

Glory to God,
**whose power, working in us,
can do infinitely more
than we can ask or imagine.
Glory to God from generation
to generation, in the Church
and in Christ Jesus,
for ever and ever. Amen.**

Dismissal...

Let us bless the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

THE SHACK

Lenten Study 2010 ☩

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A CONFLUENCE OF PATHS

It took almost a minute to knock off the ice that had already sealed shut the door of the mailbox. The reward for his efforts was a single envelope with only his first name typewritten on the outside; no stamp, no postmark, and no return address. Curious, he tore the end off the envelope, which was no easy task with fingers beginning to stiffen from the cold. Turning his back to the breath-snatching wind, he finally coaxed the single small rectangle of unfolded paper out of its nest. The typewritten message simply said:

Mackenzie,
It's been a while. I've missed you.
I'll be at the shack next weekend if you
want to get together.

—Papa

Mack stiffened as a wave of nausea rolled over him and then just

as quickly mutated into anger. He purposely thought about the shack as little as possible, and even when he did, his thoughts were neither kind nor good. If this was someone's idea of a bad joke, he had truly outdone himself. And to sign it "Papa" just made it all the more horrifying. 18

CHOICES OF THE HEART

Sarayu stepped forward. "I," she said with a flourish and bow, "am honored to sing Missy's song, which she wrote just for this occasion."

And she began to sing, with a voice like an autumn wind: a sound of turning leaves and forests slowly slumbering, the tones of oncoming night and a promise of new days dawning. It was the haunting tune that he had heard her and Papa humming before, and Mack now listened to his daughter's words:

*Breathe in me... deep
That I might breathe... and live
And hold me close that I might sleep
Soft held by all you give
Come kiss me, wind, and take my breath
Till you and I are one
And we will dance among the tombs
Until all death is gone
And no one knows that we exist
Wrapped in each other's arms
Except the One who blew the breath
That hides me safe from harm
Come kiss me, wind, and take my breath
Till you and I are one
And we will dance among the tombs
Until all death is gone*

When she finished, there was silence; and then God, all three, simultaneously said, "Amen," Mack echoed the amen, picked up one of the shovels, and, with help from Jesus, began filling in the hole, covering the box in which Missy's body rested. 234f.

“But now you can love him in the face of it. His change allows for that. Forgiveness in no way requires that you trust the one you forgive. But should he finally confess and repent, you will discover a miracle in your own heart that allows you to reach out and begin to build between you a bridge of reconciliation. And sometimes—and this may seem incomprehensible to you right now—that road may even take you to the miracle of fully restored trust.”

Mack slid to the ground and leaned back against the rock he had been sitting on. He studied the dirt between his feet. “Papa, I think I understand what you’re saying. But it feels like if I forgive this guy he gets off free. How do I excuse what he did? Is it fair to Missy if I don’t stay angry with him?”

“Mackenzie, forgiveness does not excuse anything. Believe me, the last thing this man is, is free. And you have no duty to justice in this. I will handle that. As for Missy, she has already forgiven him.”

“She has?” Mack didn’t even look up. “How could she?” “Because of my presence in her. That’s the only way true forgiveness is ever possible.”

Mack felt Papa sit down next to him on the ground, but he still didn’t look up. As Papa’s arms enfolded Mack he began to cry. “Let it all out,” he heard Papa whisper, and he finally was able to do just that. He closed his eyes as the tears poured out. Missy and her memories again flooded his mind: visions of coloring books and crayons and torn and bloody dresses. He wept until he had cried out all the darkness, all the longing, and all the loss, until there was nothing left.

With his eyes now closed, rocking back and forth, he pleaded, “Help me, Papa. Help me! What do I do? How do I forgive him?”

“Tell him.”

Mack looked up, half expecting to see a man he had never met standing there.

“How, Papa?”

“Just say it out loud. There is power in what my children declare.”

Mack began to whisper in tones at first halfhearted and stumbling, but then with increasing conviction, “I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you.” 226ff.

GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER

“Please help me!” he groaned. He stood up on shaky legs and took another step away from the car. Then he stopped and turned back. He opened the passenger door and reached in, rummaging around until he felt the small tin box. He pried the lid off and found what he was looking for, his favorite picture of Missy, which he removed along with the note. Replacing the lid, he left the box on the seat. He paused for a moment, looking at the glove box. Finally he opened it and grabbed Willie’s gun, checking to make sure it was loaded and the safety was on. Standing up, he closed the door, reached under his coat, and stuck the gun in his belt in the small of his back. He turned and faced the path once more, taking one last look at Missy’s picture before sliding it into his shirt pocket alongside the note. If they found him dead, at least they would know who had been on his mind. 77f.

And finally his heart exploded like a flash flood, releasing his pent-up anger and letting it rush down the rocky canyons of his emotions. Turning his eyes heavenward, he began screaming his anguished questions. “Why? Why did you let this happen? Why did you bring me here? Of all the places to meet you—why *here*? Wasn’t it enough to kill my baby? Do you have to toy with me too?”

In a blind rage, Mack grabbed the nearest chair and flung it at the window. It smashed into pieces. He picked up one of the legs and began destroying everything he could. Groans and moans of despair and fury burst through his lips as he beat his wrath into the terrible place. “I hate you!” In a frenzy he pounded out his rage until he was exhausted and spent.

Despairing and defeated, Mack slumped to the floor next to the bloodstain. He touched it carefully. This was all that was left of his Missy. As he lay next to the stain, his fingers tenderly traced the discolored edges and he softly whispered, “Missy, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you. I’m sorry I couldn’t find you” 80

A LONG TIME AGO, IN A GARDEN FAR, FAR AWAY

“You don’t need me at all to create your list of good and evil. But you do need me if you have any desire to stop such an insane lust for independence”

“So there is a way to fix it?” asked Mack.

“You must give up your right to decide what is good and evil on your own terms. That is a hard pill to swallow—choosing to live only in me. To do that, you must know me enough to trust me and learn to rest in my inherent goodness.”

Sarayu turned toward Mack; at least that was his impression. “Mackenzie, *evil* is a word we use to describe the absence of good, just as we use the word *darkness* to describe the absence of light or *death* to describe the absence of life. Both evil and darkness can be understood only in relation to light and good; they do not have any actual existence. I am light and I am good. I am love and there is no darkness in me. Light and Good actually exist. So, removing yourself from me will plunge you into darkness. Declaring independence will result in evil because apart from me, you can draw only upon yourself. That is death because you have separated yourself from me: Life”

“Wow!” Mack exclaimed, sitting back for a moment. “That really helps. But I can also see that giving up my independent right is not going to be an easy process. It could mean that—”

Sarayu interrupted his sentence again. “That in one instance, the good may be the presence of cancer or the loss of income—or even a life.”

“Yeah, but tell that to the person with cancer or the father whose daughter is dead,” Mack said, a little more sarcastically than he had intended.

“Oh, Mackenzie,” reassured Sarayu. “Don’t you think we have them in mind as well? Each of them was the center of another story that is untold.”

“But—” Mack could feel his control getting away as he drove his shovel in hard—“Didn’t Missy have a right to be protected?”

Forgiveness does not establish relationship. In Jesus, I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me, but only some choose relationship. Mackenzie, don't you see that forgiveness is an incredible power—a power you share with us, a power Jesus gives to all he indwells so that reconciliation can grow? When Jesus forgave those who nailed him to the cross, they were no longer in his debt, nor mine. In my relationship with those men, I will never bring up what they did or shame or embarrass them.”

“I don’t think I can do this,” Mack whispered.

“I want you to. Forgiveness is first for you, the forgiver,” answered Papa, “to release you from something that will eat you alive, that will destroy your joy and your ability to love fully and openly. Do you think this man cares about the pain and torment you have gone through? If anything, he feeds on that knowledge. Don’t you want to cut that off? And in doing so, you’ll release him from a burden that he carries whether he knows it or not—acknowledges it or not. When you choose to forgive another, you love him well.”

“I do not love him.”

“Not today, you don’t. But I do, Mack, not for what he’s become, but for the broken child that has been twisted by his pain. I want to help you take on the nature that finds more power in love and forgiveness than hate.”

“So, does that mean”—Mack was again a little angry at the direction of the conversation—“that if I forgive this man, then I let him play with Kate, or my first granddaughter?”

“Mackenzie,” Papa was strong and firm. “I already told you that forgiveness does not create a relationship. Unless people speak the truth about what they have done and change their minds and behavior, a relationship of trust is not possible. When you forgive someone you certainly release him from judgment, but without true change, no real relationship can be established.”

“So forgiveness does not require me to pretend what he did never happened?”

“How can you? You forgave your dad last night. Will you ever forget what he did to you?”

“I don’t think so.”

A MORNING OF SORROWS

“Sophia helped me understand a great deal about Missy yesterday. And it really helped talking to Papa. Uh, I mean, talking to you too.” Mack felt confused, but Papa stopped and smiled as if he understood, so Mack continued. “Is it strange that I need to talk to you about it too? I mean, you are more of a father-father, if that makes any sense.”

“I understand, Mackenzie. We are coming full circle. Forgiving your dad yesterday was a significant part of your being able to know me as Father today. You don't need to explain any further.” Somehow Mack knew they were nearing the end of a long journey, and Papa was working to help him take the last few steps. 223

“Mack, for you to forgive this man is for you to release him to me and allow me to redeem him.”

“Redeem him?” Again Mack felt the fire of anger and hurt. “I don't want you to redeem him! I want you to hurt him, to punish him, to put him in hell...” His voice trailed off.

Papa waited patiently for the emotions to ease.

“I'm stuck, Papa. I can't just forget what he did, can I?” Mack implored.

“Forgiveness is not about forgetting, Mack. It is about letting go of another person's throat.”

“But I thought you forgot our sins.”

“Mack, I am God. I forgot nothing. I know everything. So forgetting for me is the choice to limit myself. Son”—Papa's voice got quiet and Mack looked up at him, directly into his deep brown eyes—“because of Jesus, there is now no law demanding that I bring your sins back to mind. They are gone when it comes to you and me, and they run no interference in our relationship.”

“But this man...”

“But he too is my son. I want to redeem him.”

“So what then? I just forgive him and everything is okay, and we become buddies?” Mack stated softly but bitterly.

“You don't have a relationship with this man, at least not yet.”

“No, Mack. A child is protected because she is loved, not because she has a right to be protected.”

That stopped him. Somehow, what Sarayu had just been saying seemed to turn the whole world upside down, and he was struggling to find some footing. Surely there were some rights that he could legitimately hold on to. 138/.

WADE IN THE WATER

Jesus braced himself with the stick to stand and paused while Mack finished his last bite and stood to join him. Together they began walking along the lakeshore. “But that isn't all. The woman's desire—and the word is actually her *turning*—so the woman's turning was not to the works of her hands but to the man, and his response was to rule ‘over’ her, to take power over her, to become the ruler. Before the choosing, she found her identity, her security, and her understanding of good and evil only in me, as did man.”

“No wonder I feel like a failure with Nan. I can't seem to be that for her.”

“You weren't made to be. And in trying you'll only be playing God.”

Mack reached down, picked up a flat stone, and skipped it across the lake. “Is there any way out of this?”

“It is so simple, but never easy for you: by *re-turning*. By turning back to me. By giving up your ways of power and manipulation and just coming back to me.” Jesus sounded as if he was pleading. “Women in general will find it difficult to turn from a man and stop demanding that he meet their needs, provide security, and protect their identity, and return to me. Men in general find it very hard to turn from the works of their hands, their own quests for power and security and significance, and return to me.”

“I've always wondered why men have been in charge.” Mack pondered. “Males seem to be the cause of so much of the pain in the world. They account for most of the crimes, and many of those are perpetrated against women and”—he paused—“children.”

“Women,” Jesus continued as he picked up a stone and skipped it, “turned from us to another relationship, while men turned to themselves and the ground.” 149

VERBS AND OTHER FREEDOMS

“Are you saying I don't have to follow the rules?” Mack had now completely stopped eating and was concentrating on the conversation.

“Yes. In Jesus you are not under any law. All things are lawful.”

“You can't be serious! You're messing with me again” moaned Mack.

“Child,” said Papa, “you ain't heard nuthin'yet.”

“Mackenzie,” Sarayu continued, “those who are afraid of freedom are those who cannot trust us to live in them. Trying to keep the Law is actually a declaration of independence, a way of keeping control.”

“Is that why we like the Law so much—to give us some control?” asked Mack.

“It is much worse than that,” resumed Sarayu. “It grants you the power to judge others and feel superior to them. You believe you are living to a higher standard than those you judge. Enforcing rules, especially in more subtle expressions like responsibility and expectation, is a vain attempt to create certainty out of uncertainty. And contrary to what you might think, I have a great fondness for uncertainty. Rules cannot bring freedom; they have only the power to accuse.”

“Whoa!” Mack suddenly realized what Sarayu had said. “Are you telling me that responsibility and expectation are just another form of rules we are no longer under? Did I hear you right?”

“Yup,” Papa affirmed. “Now we're in it—Sarayu, he is all yours!”

Mack ignored Papa, choosing instead to concentrate on Sarayu, which was no easy task. 205

A MEETING OF HEARTS

“Okay, now I’m feeling guilty,” he admitted.

“Let me know how that works for you,” Papa chuckled. “Seriously, Mackenzie, it’s not about feeling guilty. Guilt’ll never help you find freedom in me. The best it can do is make you try harder to conform to some ethic on the outside. I’m about the inside.”

“But what you said, I mean, about hiding inside lies. I guess I’ve done that one way or another most of my life.”

“Honey, you’re a survivor. No shame in that. Your daddy hurt you something fierce. Life hurt you. Lies are one of the easiest places for survivors to run. They give you a sense of safety, a place where you have to depend only on yourself. But it’s a dark place, isn’t it?”

“So dark,” Mack muttered with a shake of his head.

“But are you willing to give up the power and safety it promises you? That’s the question.”

“What do you mean?” asked Mack, looking up at her.

“Lies are a little fortress; inside them you can feel safe and powerful. Through your little fortress of lies you try to run your life and manipulate others. But the fortress needs walls, so you build some. These are the justifications for your lies. You know, like you are doing this to protect someone you love, to keep them from feeling pain. Whatever works, just so you feel okay about the lies.” 189

HERE COME DA JUDGE

“So then, Mackenzie, may I ask which of your children you love the most?”

Mack smiled inside. As the kids had come along, he had wrestled to answer this very question. “I don’t love any one of them more than any of the others. I love each of them differently,” he said, choosing his words carefully.

“Explain that to me, Mackenzie,” she said with interest.

“Well, each one of my children is unique. And that uniqueness and special personhood calls out a unique response from me.” Mack settled back into his chair. “I remember after Jon, my first, was born. I was so captivated by the wonder of who this little life was that I actually worried about whether I would have anything left to love a second child with. But when Tyler came along, it was as if he brought with him a special gift for me, a whole new capacity to love him specially. Come to think of it, it’s like when Papa says she is especially fond of someone. When I think of each of my children individually, I find that I am especially fond of each one.”

“Well said, Mackenzie.” Her appreciation was tangible, but then she leaned forward slightly, her tone still soft but serious. “But what about when they do not behave, or they make choices other than those you would want them to make, or they are just belligerent and rude? What about when they embarrass you in front of others? How does that affect your love for them?”

Mack responded slowly and deliberately, “It doesn’t, really.” He knew that what he was saying was true, even if Katie didn’t believe it sometimes. “I admit that it does affect me and sometimes I get embarrassed or angry, but even when they act badly, they are still my sons and my daughter, they are still Josh and Kate, and they will be forever. What they do might affect my pride, but not my love for them.”

She sat back, beaming. “You are wise in the ways of real love, Mackenzie. So many believe that it is love that grows, but it is the *knowing* that grows and love simply expands to contain it. Love is just the skin of knowing. Mackenzie, you love your children, whom you

know so well, with a wonderful and real love.” 156f.

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEASTS

Jesus walked over and sat next to him on the log. Mack leaned over and put his elbows on his knees, staring past his hands and down at the pebbles near his feet. Finally he said, “I keep thinking about her, alone in that truck, so terrified..”

Jesus reached over and put his hand on Mack’s shoulder and squeezed. Gently he said, “Mack, she was never alone. I never left her; we never left her, not for one instant. I could no more abandon her, or you, than I could abandon myself.”

“Did she know you were there?”

“Yes, Mack, she did. Not at first—the fear was overwhelming and she was in shock. It took hours to get up here from the campsite. But as Sarayu wrapped herself around her, Missy settled down. The long ride actually gave us a chance to talk.”

Mack was trying to take all of this in. He could no longer speak.

“She may have been only six years old, but Missy and I are friends. We talk. She had no idea what was going to happen. She was actually more worried about you and the other kids, knowing you couldn’t find her. She prayed for you, for your peace.”

Mack wept, fresh tears rolling down his cheeks. This time, he didn’t mind. Jesus gently pulled him into his arms and held him.

“Mack, I don’t think you want to know all the details. I’m sure they won’t help you. But I can tell you there was not a moment that we were not with her. She knew my peace, and you would have been proud of her. She was so brave!”

The tears flowed freely now, but even Mack noticed this time it was different. He was no longer alone. Without embarrassment he wept onto the shoulder of this man he had grown to love. With each sob he felt the tension drain away, replaced by a deep sense of relief. Finally, he took a deep breath and blew it out as he lifted his head.

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