

THIS BEAUTIFUL MESS

PRACTICING
THE PRESENCE OF
THE KINGDOM
OF GOD

FOREWORD BY
DONALD MILLER

RICK McKINLEY

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This Beautiful Mess

“*This Beautiful Mess* will revolutionize the way you look at Jesus and His mission to bring the kingdom of God into our cosmos. If you are content with mere religion, don’t read this book. It will force you to engage in the true mission of Christ.”

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THIS
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To my wife, Jeanne: Your unconditional love has shown me that grace is living and breathing and embracing. You are the constant beauty in the midst of my mess.

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Foreword

Years ago, I dropped off my friend John at the airport. It was early, and we'd driven for a half hour. I'd dropped John off many times before, and the drive always gave us a chance to catch up. Our conversation that morning turned to politics. The president was to visit Portland the following week, and several of my friends were joining a march they hoped would bring attention to trouble they attributed to the World Bank. As we rounded an overpass and dropped onto Airport Way, my friend said something I haven't forgotten. He said that when Jesus comes, when Jesus reigns, we will be amazed at how differently and perfectly He governs. "What do you mean?" I asked. John, who is something of a Bible scholar, provided a little more context for his comment. Jesus looked nothing like what the people of His day expected, he said. Jesus announced the arrival of the kingdom, yet He didn't work to build a government or take a stretch of land. He didn't pen a constitution. He wrote nothing, save truth and love on the hearts of His friends. That's different from any other king, living or historical. In light of this, John said, it will be interesting to see how Jesus governs.

Our conversation that morning marked the first time I had given serious consideration to the kingdom of God. Before this I'd thought of God as a shepherd, a father, a bridegroom, and so on, but not so much as a king, at least not king of an actual kingdom. I considered Him king in the way I considered Him Lord, which I'm ashamed to admit meant little more than a sentiment of praise or adoration.

What if, I began to wonder, we are actually citizens of a greater

kingdom? What does that kingdom look like? How does or will Jesus govern such a kingdom? What does patriotism look like in this kingdom? And how do I really know if I am a citizen?

Growing up in the evangelical church, I heard little about the kingdom of God. If the church was doing something in the community, it was simply the local church. The church did the work, and the church took credit for the work, being careful to give ultimate glory to God. And while I considered and still consider the work of these churches to be meaningful, these actions seemed to generate from the paradigm of the church as an aid organization or community center more than as an embassy of God's kingdom. By this way of thinking, if the church had a kingdom, supported a kingdom, loved a kingdom, and defended a kingdom, that kingdom would have to be America, not some mysterious kingdom that Jesus governed.

The church I attend today, whose pastor wrote this book, embraces a different paradigm. This is not to say that we don't love America. We do. But more than America, we love the kingdom of God. Ultimately, the rules and workings of God's kingdom are a departure from the rules and workings of the utopia-envisioned declarations of our Founding Fathers. Unfortunately, their construct must balance its agenda atop the social upheaval generated by the Fall, a severe disadvantage.

Pastor Rick told me about his book before it was published. Now in its second edition, this book wonderfully clarifies some of my earlier questions regarding the mysteries of the kingdom. He also helps me understand my role in this kingdom and why *Imago Dei*, our church, involves itself in the world so differently than any other congregation I've been a part of.

As I read this book, I feel a sense of relief that—as tragic and temporary as the kingdoms of the world may be—true justice, true peace, true unity in diversity will happen within the kingdom of God and that this

kingdom—one without borders or flags—is actually alive and active throughout the world today. Considering humankind's limited ability to demonstrate kingship (a few thousand wars come to mind), I personally find great hope in the presence of the kingdom of God and a deeper desire to participate in it.

I want to thank Rick for bringing these issues to the table and for offering us, with humor and wisdom, a view into the workings of the kingdom. I hope you enjoy this book as much as I have and find within these pages more than a perspective on the kingdom of God, but an invitation to act on behalf of a better world.

All the love of Christ to you in the process,

Donald Miller
Portland, Oregon

Preface to the Second Edition

A lot has happened over the seven years since *This Beautiful Mess* was first released. Time does that, I suppose. Gray hairs have found their way into the beard of that thirty-something pastor who seemingly overnight became a forty-something pastor. With those years came loss and pain but lots of joy as well.

The son I write about in chapter 7 is no longer thirteen but twenty-one and old enough to share a pint with me. My children have grown, as has that mustard seed that first fell into the hearts of a handful of people who called themselves Imago Dei Community. That community has morphed into something better than I had ever dreamed possible. The seed continues to grow into a beautiful tree sprouting the “already and not yet” reality that is the kingdom of God. It’s a vision of love and peace and hope and new life breaking into ordinary places and making them extraordinary. I am more humbled than ever to be part of such a vision.

Perhaps more important, I am seeing that Jesus’ vision of His kingdom has spread like rays of sun over the city of Portland. So many amazing things have happened that I can’t take the time to tell, but perhaps a story or two will lend some validation to my claims.

Portland sits in the great Northwest as a proudly progressive city that most would say has little tolerance for the church and her ancient claims of a resurrected Savior. Over the past seven years, however, we have seen this city take notice of the people of the King, and not because of what we are *against* but what we are *for*.

On this score, a growing collective of kingdom people are leading

the way. Portland has one of the worst epidemics of sex trafficking in the country. With this ugly fact in mind, the churches of Portland have collaborated with city officials from the mayor to city commissioners to the social-service agencies to make this horrific reality a memory. As part of our work together, churches have given large amounts of money to help build safe houses for victims of sex trafficking. In doing this, we have grown relationships across many lines that have led to amazing conversations about the peace, love, and hope that come from Jesus. Former victims have been rescued! The echoes of Isaiah 61 can be heard through the streets of our city: “He will set the captives free.”

We have seen nonprofits emerge from this joint effort to help eradicate sex trafficking. The church has funded positions for advocates who work within the system so that more and more people are trained and available to help the many girls in need. The people of the King have volunteered as counselors to assist children in healing and recovery from such a devastating reality.

These initiatives are shaping the culture of the city as well as the conversation of the church. For example, *Christianity Today's* “This Is Our City” project made Portland its first stop. Working with the project staff was a gift, and their work is worth your time to read.

Another area in which Christ's body has made a mark is with at-risk kids. A few years ago, Portland churches gave the city one hundred thousand dollars to begin a mentoring program for the most at-risk eighth graders in the city. Five hundred of them! Along with funds, the church provided mentors for these students. The mentors stayed in touch through high school to serve as friends and expose the students to the possibilities that awaited them if they finished school. The mentors visited college campuses with them and talked about their dreams. Where there was perhaps very little hope, the kingdom broke in through flesh-and-bone

relationship. God's people showed up in the love of Christ to go on a journey through the lives of these kids.

The reason for this program stemmed from a tragic fact. For more than a decade, over 40 percent of Portland's high school students dropped out. Such a high number has a cascading impact on our city. Hopeless young adults turn to dead ends such as the sex or drug industry or end up among our homeless teen population.

Then one amazing evening, I sat at a gathering of leaders and donors. Instrumental in the move of God here has been internationally known evangelist Luis Palau and his organization. That night we gathered to celebrate the story of Luis and his ministry that spans over fifty years and has impacted millions of people. Partway through the night, Sam Adams, Portland's mayor at the time, came to the stage. Sam announced that four years after the mustard seed of our little mentor dream had taken root, change had come. For the first time in fifteen years, the dropout rate had been reduced by about 15 percent! He said that this was directly related to the work of the church! A truly remarkable relationship had brought the beauty of the kingdom to the forefront of our city.

For every statistic, there is a story. Young people who didn't think they had much of a future are now dreaming of what they can become. Young people are going to college, not meth houses, heading to careers, not to Eighty-Second Avenue to sell their bodies for a meal. And perhaps most important, they have friends and mentors who love Jesus and love them.

There are hundreds of stories, and I am hopeful God will allow me to tell them in future books, but they are stories of the vision that *This Beautiful Mess* holds for you and me: A vision of a King who is loving and good and whose reign has changed everything. A vision of a new realm of activity in His power that is breaking in and yet is not without opposition. A vision desperately needed for the people of God today.

As I look out at the landscape of the church, I continue to hear conversations about how to grow it, how to do it better, how to reach the postmodern folks, how to dress it up and make it seem more relevant. The problem is this: If you start with the church, you might end with the church. If you end with the church, you may never get to the kingdom. But if you start with the kingdom, you will always get the church.

The message that rings true in our city is that if the church would simply *be* the church, then the kingdom of Jesus will be displayed. What a gift it has been to participate with God in *His* vision instead of recrafting and rebranding our own.

I am grateful that this book is being updated and rereleased and that the good people at Multnomah Books believe in its message. Foremost among them is my friend David Kopp, the executive editor. I pray that this book will continue to be a small spark in the large flame of the kingdom and that its message will help others catch the fire of Jesus and His reign.

I continue to be grateful for so many who make this kind of dreaming possible for me. Two loves have altered my life eternally. The first is my wife, Jeanne, who continues to show me what heaven's grace looks like in the beauty of her blond hair and blue eyes and in the deeper beauty of her unconditional love. The second is my King. Jesus continues to draw me into the white-hot fury of His love, inviting me to relinquish my reign for His, which tears me away from self-focused living into the freedom of relationship with the Father through the Son by the Spirit. His faithfulness defeats my every act of doubt and rebellion and proves to me over and over that nothing can separate me from His love.

There is a roughness to the journey, a wrestling that keeps me authentic. But Jesus has proven to be a most able wrestler. He triumphs over my mess with the strength of His love and the beauty of His glory.

I pray that the words you read will lead you into His unstoppable vision of another, better world, of new life breaking into ordinary places and lives and making them extraordinary.

Rick McKinley
Portland, Oregon
January 2013



PART 1

Discovering the Kingdom

When Jesus was on earth, He painted a radical vision for His followers. He called it the “kingdom of God.” His kingdom is a heavenly reality that lands smack in the middle of everyday life. Even here, Jesus said—in the harshness and mess of earth—His kingdom is the way things really are. His announcement was nothing less than revolutionary. Maybe it was the clash of opposites or the paradox that Jesus’ kingdom exists in parallel with many lesser kingdoms, but either way, His followers were not quick to pick up on the revolution. They longed for another world—a world without oppressors, injustice, beggars, or messes. For three years, Jesus walked among a people overcome with longing and spread the good news of His kingdom. He said that His kingdom was already happening all around them. It is a historical scene that captures my heart: God in

the flesh breaking in to their world with healing spiritual authority and simple yet profound words. “The kingdom of God is near,” He said. “The kingdom of God is within you.”

Jesus invites us to live out the historical reality of His kingdom in our contemporary post-everything culture, but we have to face a hard truth: most followers of Jesus have grown accustomed to a spirituality that doesn’t remotely resemble revolution. We call Him Lord but not King, and we’ve gone deaf and blind to the “whole” gospel He came to share.

Part 1 of *This Beautiful Mess* is intended to help us hear the words of Jesus again and begin to shift our affections toward Him and His brilliant vision. What we’ll discover is that His radical call still goes forth today. We will realize that the empire we long to embrace is His. We will understand in a new way what it means to be human, to be forgiven, to live as disciples, to become the people of the revolution.



Beautiful, Mess

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“**This beautiful mess...**” A weird but intriguing statement. What can be beautiful about a mess? I remember as a kid going to the dump on Saturdays with my dad. I used to love everything about it (I know, scary). I loved pulling on leather work gloves. I loved packing the truck with all the busted junk and smelly garbage we wanted to get rid of. I loved jumping up in the cab with Dad and driving away with our load, off for another adventure into the steamy lands of Middle-earth. I loved everything about going to the dump until we got there and opened the truck door. Then love turned to fascination. Piles of junk, moldering yard debris, decaying garbage, solids turning to goo and oozing all over the place. The stench of ruin and rot hit hard, like a fist in the gut. It coated the back of your throat with acid and smoke.

If you’ve never been a young boy, well, it’s hard to explain the appeal. Maybe it’s because you know you’ll come back with another gross-out story of something you saw or smelled or stepped in. One time we saw a family at a rickety picnic table eating lunch right in the middle of all that

stink. Tuna salad sandwiches, chips, juice, ooze. Our family laughed about that for years.

Looking back, though, I find beauty in the experience. Not in the dump itself—I'm mostly beyond the "gross is cool" stage—but in the whole "going there with Dad" experience. I was with him. I was being useful. Dad and I were working and sweating, doing men's work together. I see now that going to the dump was beautiful *and* gross and messy.

So why would I use "beautiful mess" to define the kingdom of God? God is perfect. God is not messy. Why would His kingdom be messy?

Perhaps in this way: think of mess as real and apparent complexity, as absolute resistance against the tidy, easy, or manageable. Think of mysterious new life growing inexplicably out of loss and decay. Think of richness in what the world casts off. Think of a boy finding family and purpose and goodness in a desolate place and in the overwhelming stink of it.

Mess like that.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

Happy are the have-nots.

Favored are the forgotten.

Beautiful is the mess.

What could He have meant? How could both ends of the statement be true? All we know is that (1) inside the dynamic of that paradox is a God-sized idea and (2) to accept one truth without the other would be to miss it completely.

Christians don't like mess much, not in our world and especially not in ourselves or our churches. Somewhere along the line, we have embraced a picture of a Jesus who would turn us into perfect people unpolluted by the world or our own sin. But He didn't. In Him we are new creations; in ourselves we are dump dwellers. Longing for our full redemption, we

strive to please Him and groan in our fallenness and bask in His beauty. For whatever reason, Jesus didn't choose to instantly sanitize the whole lot of us. We often think He did, though, so we spend a lot of time running around with mops and buckets, getting ready for a bunk inspection. In our kingdoms, we begin to believe that we can fix all our messes. In Jesus' kingdom, He alone can start with our messes and accomplish something we never could have imagined. And He does.

Which brings us to beauty.

The kingdom of God is the living, breathing presence and purpose and reign of God on our planet. It's beautiful *and* irreducible. To reduce it to a seven-point outline might help you on the quiz, but it won't get you any closer to the experience. It would be like cutting up a corpse to figure out what it means to be human. Sure, you'd end up with identifiable body parts in formaldehyde and maybe a micron photograph of a neurotransmitter, but the wonder of pulsing human life would elude you. Do you think in some piece of brain you'd find clues to friendship and falling in love, learn why beach sand feels good between your toes, or what it means to be a child of God who also happens to like football, cigars, and the taste of a great Cabernet?

To be human is to live with loose ends with people and in a world of loose ends, feeling you've been made for perfection but knowing you can't get there on your own. Knowing that you've been placed here to bring a taste of something beautiful and blessed.

I love studying theology, but I've noticed that theology has little tolerance for loose ends. As the study of God, it mostly uses human tools like logic and interpretation and systems to define Him and how He works in our lives. Countless brilliant women and men have written penetrating works that help us think more clearly about God. They give us a rich theological heritage, and I encourage you to read them. But be careful. You can study God expertly in His parts and miss Him entirely in

His Being. Sometimes I think today's evangelicals have dissected God, put Him in jars, labeled all His parts, and then breathed a sigh of relief. "Whew. Job done," they gasp. "Now we have no more confusion about God. Now we have a God we can market. At least now we can be excruciatingly confident that 'our team' is right."

As right as body parts in formaldehyde.

I've found that theology, especially the systematic kind, becomes more helpful when you think of it as grammar. Grammar helps us to read and write, but it cannot on its own give us one memorable sentence. That's because grammar is a tool, not an end in itself. Meaningful communication is the end for which the writer strives. Communication like, for example, poetry. Yes, grammar helps us understand and experience a poem. But just when we get comfortable, a good poet will break a language rule, turn an image inside out, give us the slip, send us falling.

There's nothing we can say in response but, "Hmm, good poem. I felt those words."

To help us encounter truths that would die if put into jars, Jesus showed us His kingdom in a gallery of poems, or word pictures. Each time, He showed us another facet of what He wanted to teach. What He did not do was give us just *one* picture of His kingdom, much less a short dictionary definition. Of course, He could have. He could have dissected it for us—defined and dead—for all to inspect.

Instead, He gave us a multifaceted picture that is full of shape and contour and texture and tension and beauty and mess. It is both three dimensional and experiential. To be known, this picture must be desired, received, and lived over and over again. In the genius of Jesus, we find ourselves grasping aspects of the kingdom through a *living* definition that is growing and changing all the time. Not neat (that's dogma). Not reduced (that's formula). Not disassembled (that's dead).

But beautiful.

In high school, my friends and I befriended one of the school employees. She was a gruff middle-aged woman. Her stern exterior was meant to scare us into good behavior, I suppose. But inside she was very cool. Like your friend's mom who was cool. That's how she was. She made sure no one left campus at lunch or smoked behind the backstops. For some reason that I still can't figure out, she really liked my group of friends. We even called her Mom.

Once, we talked Mom into going into the janitor's office and calling the school and pretending to be our moms to get us permission slips out of school. Yes, the dreaded "cutting class" ploy. I'm passing on a little personal history here, not making a recommendation (although if you didn't cut class even once, you know you wish you had). Mom made calls for three or four of us. How she pulled it off I don't know, but sure enough, while we were sitting in class, the phone rang, and the teacher sent us on our way.

Freedom! We piled into my car and made our escape. Gone, away, free. Everyone else was back in class, grinding it out, watching the clock. But we were flying, no longer prisoners of any program, rule, or schedule.

I hope this book feels like a permission slip from Mom for you: get out of religion free. You see, Someone knows and really likes you. Someone *wants* you to find that larger, freer experience of being that you sense is out there just waiting for you to live it.

I realize that seeking the King with mostly pictures and stories to go by may feel dangerous or rebellious to you. But I encourage you to receive this book not as the last theological word on anything, but as a well-intentioned, God-loving invitation to go and grow and be where you haven't been before.

Listen to the teachings of Jesus with me. Puzzle over His pictures and stories. Then look for His redemptive reign at work in the mess of your day. It's there, I promise. You may not end up with a perfect argument for every question about Jesus our King. But by the end, you'll know what it means to say, maybe for the first time, "Hmm, I feel His beauty."

Voices

Look Up Anyway

Last Wednesday I walked home as the sun came down over the Willamette. I was listening to Elliott as I paced the streets of his city, wondering if he'd walked where my feet were falling, if he knew any of the people who smiled at me as I passed. It was still warm enough for my Irish skin to bear exposure. It smelled like summer and youth and hope in a way America does best at that denim blue hour of the evening. Portland is not an easy winter city. The rain washes over everything until you feel your very self eroding down to the marrow. It is a city of sodden Converse trainers, bad-hair weeks, and broken people. I was remembering riding the bus on Eighty-Second a few months ago. The most broken people in all the world ride the TriMet on Eighty-Second. They look at their feet and carry their worlds in plastic bags. They have crazy Jerry Springer hair and ill-fitting clothes. They never smile. They are not funny crazy like the people on the Burnside buses. They are sad crazy. The bus was full of these folk, and above them, pinned to the side of the bus, was a short poem:

I believe in myself slowly
 It takes all the doubt I have
 It takes my wonder.

If it was not so sad, I would have laughed at the irony: forty people on a bus who never look up to see the only thing they need to be told.

Last Wednesday, as I padded the streets, I was thinking about this and about how Portland seems different to me now. When I think of Portland, I think of beauty pushing through brokenness. I think of individual people and their intricate grace stories emerging from the ugliness. I think of community and art and freedom, individuality, color, music, culture, and diversity all laughing loud in adversity's face. On the side of a falling-down building at the bottom of Belmont, someone has painted the cutest little flower and in spidery handwriting has crowned it with the commandment "Take a Stand." This is Portland to me. It's about buying back the ugliness and redeeming it for a better purpose. It's about acknowledging that sometimes you cannot change your situation, yet choosing to look up anyway and stare hope straight in the eye.

—Jan Carson



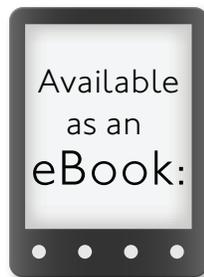
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