

Ava Diane Meder has no idea what she is getting into.

She is about to be baptized, as we say *reborn a child of God*, and she will comprehend it about as much as she did her first birth into the world.

She will become a new member of the family, our family, God's family the church.

She has no idea what she is getting into.

There's a good chance that one of the first words Ava will learn to say, especially given the occasionally obnoxious blessing of an older brother, is the word *mine*.

It's not a word that will help her much in the church.

Luke writes about the church in Acts: *Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.*

The community is more important than the individual; the family comes first.

Strangely, however, Joseph McCarthy never had to go on any rampages through American congregations to expunge this dangerous practice.

This vision of the church, a community free of the word *mine*, is the close of chapter four.

Chapter five opens with the word *But*.

It does not take long, dear Ava, for your family the church to fail to live up to its ideals.

God's people will disappoint and disillusion you; we are a house full of hypocrites, gossips, liars, backstabbers, cowards, drunks, self-righteous pricks and self-centered jerks...and the laity aren't much better.

Luke has hardly gotten out a sentence about the purity of the early church's sharing with and caring for one another when he has to start the next story with the word *But*...

*But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

He put the keys to the van in the offering plate but never mentioned the boat.

"Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?"

Peter asked him a few more leading questions, too; then Luke writes:

*Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died.*

Not long after, Sapphira came by: "have you seen my husband?"

"Yeah, he was here."

"Where is he?"

"He left. Hey, by the way, did your property sell?"

Pretty soon Sapphira was dead too.

Now as serious as God obviously is about the community being more important than the individual, and about the church living in honesty and integrity and radical generosity and mutual care, it seems that God has stopped smiting the selfish and the scheming, presumably because otherwise there would be no one left in church.

Mere tithing now strikes people as extreme.

Just because God is willing to give everything to me doesn't mean that I can't rationalize a justification that the first ten percent of my income is way too much to give, even rude of the church to ask.

My hard-earned money and stuff, which quickly becomes expensive to have, protect, insure, maintain and store, can't actually be God's because, as Ava will soon be able to tell you, it's *mine*.

Some stuff, of course, we hold in common, things in this building we all agree to share. That is why we have locks on our doors.

Some of our sound equipment was stolen a couple of weeks ago; now our sound cabinet has a new lock, and I have a new key.

When I was promised the keys of the kingdom, I didn't realize the key ring would be so fat.

The world is full of selfish, soulless thieves and crooks and criminals just like the church is, so we have to pay for insurance and lock up the goods, and before we even know it, we become a community of scared disciples huddled in a locked room, afraid of what lurks outside.

Ava, what you are getting into is a circle of cowering, timid believers, locking out the world and locking in themselves, carefully packaged and padlocked in airtight doctrine and tradition and habit, as safe and as exciting as freeze-dried fruit.

And remember...that's the leadership.

That's the apostles, the originals, the flagship founding committee...with one hopeful exception.

There was one guy, Thomas, who had the courage to be on the scary side of the locked doors, out in the open; he missed the meeting.

Thomas was always the guy--every church committee has one--who asks too many questions and thinks through things slowly and raises concerns and doubts and, when he does sign on, is as solid a team player as anyone.

For some reason Thomas missed the meeting, so it was going along smoothly.

Nobody dropped dead, but nobody showed much life either, with an agenda full of fear and hand-wringing about now what and worries about how we're going to make budget after we spent so much on the new security system.

And then it happened.

Someone broke in.

The church meeting was burglarized by a known criminal.

Who said *Peace be with you and Receive the Holy Spirit and as the Father has sent me, so I send you.*"

Ava, child of God, peace be with you.

Receive the Holy Spirit.

As the Father has sent Jesus, so Jesus has sent us, and with us now sends you...into the scary world, beyond the locked doors, beyond safety and security and sense, with a message of radical and ridiculous grace...

You are being sent with the rest of us to bring forgiveness, and healing, and hope.

And you are being launched from a community of forgiven sinners and sacred screw-ups, disciples who would be nothing more than cheats and cowards if not for the breath of Jesus, the Spirit of God, breaking through our dead-bolted

hearts and double-locked lives to bring us peace and push us to share it with the hurting, hemorrhaging world that God so loves.

You have no idea what you are getting into.

The world is complicated and frightening, a gnarled tangle of beauty and pain, and so too is your new family the church.

What makes all the difference is the One who breaks in.

From beyond the locked doors of death comes the Christ, who breathes God's Spirit, who brings God's peace, who assures us all that whatever we get into will be no match for what is getting into us.

Sister Ava, child of God, the risen Christ now and forever beholds you with a twinkle in his wise eye, holds you in his strong, scarred hands, embraces you close to his heart, and says *Mine*.