

Sunday, October 3, 2021
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 22 (Year B)

Mark 10.2-16

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1542216092799504>

(Sermon begins at about 21:15)

“Receive the Kingdom of God as a Little Child”

Sometimes, the Gospel isn't really about what it initially seems to be about. Sometimes, you have to dig for the real gem buried in the story. As we just heard, the majority of our Gospel reading for today talks about divorce. But is that the real take-away from today's Gospel? As we are told, "Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (Mk 10.2). What ensues is Jesus' response. Now to be sure, while Jesus gave a well-reasoned response based on Jewish Scripture, there was no chance Jesus could have answered the question in a way that would have satisfied all those present. Remember, the Pharisees asked the question about divorce to test Jesus. It was likely that the issue was so divisive that no matter what he said, someone would have taken exception with his response.

Now Jesus played it fairly safe and responded with a pretty conservative, orthodox perspective. That ideally there should be no divorce. But he also recognizes that the Jewish laws, as outlined in Deuteronomy, do permit divorce. Specifically, a man could initiate a divorce—and it was only the man who could do so—merely because "he finds something objectional" about his wife (Deut 24.1). "You burned the toast one too many times, woman. You're out of here!" But by Jesus' time, what was considered appropriate grounds for divorce was a matter of considerable dispute. Some felt that divorce should only be initiated in matters of adultery. Of the woman being unfaithful. A woman was not allowed to divorce her husband even if he had been unfaithful. And in contrast, things were more confusing because the area was occupied by the Roman Empire. In Roman society, divorce could be initiated by either the man or the woman. And there is evidence that by Jesus' time, some Jewish wives were actually allowed to initiate divorce. As a result of the changing landscape, this was a matter of great debate in Jesus' time. Hence, the question being viewed as a test. One sure fire way to diminish Jesus' power and popularity would be to get him take a position that alienated some of his followers.

Another thought as to how this might have been a test had to do with King Herod Antipas. You may recall that John the Baptist condemned Herod's marriage to Herodias, because she had previously been married to Herod's brother, but divorced him to marry Herod. And we see where John the Baptist's condemnation got him. It's possible that some might have viewed raising the question of divorce as a way of getting Jesus to take a position that might anger Herod. With the potential for similar results to that of John the Baptist.

So, that was what was going on, or behind, the Gospel for today. But given the significant differences between divorce in our 21st century American context as compared to first century Near Eastern practices, it's best not to focus on the statutory details and focus more on the underlying principles. On what is really the heart of Jesus' message. His perspective on marriage

and divorce almost prefigures the scene that follows, where it is noted that people were bringing children to be blessed by Jesus and the disciples were trying to dissuade such actions. To which Jesus responds, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (Mk 10.14).

But before I dive deeper on that matter, let’s stay with the subject of divorce for just a moment longer, because, as I said, it actually does relate to his view on children. Children are vulnerable. We recognize this even in our own day. Thankfully we have laws protecting the rights of children. We have Child Protective Services and other agencies and groups to look out and advocate for the rights and wellbeing of minors. But not so in Jesus’ time. In ancient times, women and children were little more than property. Women, and particularly children, were dependent on marriage to provide for their care and wellbeing. This dependence, combined with the man’s ability to initiate divorce at will and without cause, left both women and their children incredibly vulnerable. Jesus’ position on divorce—or rather the preservation of a marriage—really was centered on protection of those who were most vulnerable: women and children. Particularly children.

This is really the underlying principle of Jesus’ message. Care for those who are most vulnerable. Care for those who are most dependent on others. But Jesus does not stop there. He equates marriage and divorce—or rather, the protection that marriage and the prohibition against divorce afforded to the most vulnerable—with our relationship with God. That Jesus, that God, loves and cares for us—each and every one of us—in the way that is lifted up as the ideal for marriage. As being about the love and care of children. “Let the little children come to me.” This is an invitation for all of God’s children—from the newborn to the centenarian—to come to him. That he is waiting, arms opened, to take us in his loving embrace, to take us into his care. “For it is to such as these”—for it is to such as us—“that the kingdom of God belongs.”

Of course, when God invites, we have to make a response. Jesus gives us an idea of what that response looks like—beyond a mere “yes” or “no.” Jesus says, “Truly I tell you”—meaning that what he is about to say is of great importance, so pay attention—“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mk 10.15). This may refer back to our Gospel from two weeks ago, where Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mk 9.36-37). And while that certainly speaks to both the invitation and its acceptance, I think Jesus had more in mind when he says today, “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” Because this implies more than just response. It implies that the nature of our response is what is critical.

Just think about children and how they view the world. How they approach the world. How they are in the world. Particularly little children, when they are still innocent, still oblivious, to the way the world really operates. For the most part, children are full of wonder. They are curious about everything that goes on around them. This is quite often expressed in awe and amazement at what they observe and what they experience. They are open-minded, absorbing all that goes on around them. Observing details that we take for granted or simply overlook. Questioning what they experience not out of a desire to judge, but as a way to learn and to understand. Children are open-hearted, filled with love for what is, purely because it is. Filled

with pure, unprejudiced love for those they encounter. Longing to be in relationship without concern for the superficial. Recognizing the connection they have with all people, with all creation. In these ways, children, particularly little children, are able to see the divine in ways that we are unable to. Or unwilling to. To see not only the Divine that is God, but also to see something of the divine in everything and everyone they encounter. It is this innocence, this wonder, this open-mindedness, this open-heartedness, that allows them to be receptive to God's love and God's blessings in extraordinary ways.

That is what Jesus says we need to strive for if we are to receive the kingdom of God. To strive for those qualities of wonder and amazement, of open-mindedness and open-heartedness. To be open to seeing God at work in the world around us. To be open to seeing all those we encounter as made in the image and likeness of God, just as we are. To see one another as being temples for the indwelling of God's Spirit, just as we are. To be open to receiving the many blessings God offers us, great and small. To be open to receiving the many blessings we miss because we are too busy being adults and not open to being as a little child.

One commentator provides a beautiful summary of what can be a confusing and even contentious Gospel passage: "the good news of the Gospel in this passage is that God cares especially for the most vulnerable, and calls us to do the same. Jesus evaluates social institutions (like marriage and divorce) through this lens, and he sees social groups (like children or outsiders) through it, too. Such groups deserve respect and protection, of course, but it's also true that their wisdom and perspective deserve attention—not least because of what they can teach the wider community about faith, love, and 'receiving the kingdom of God.'"¹

Today we begin our annual stewardship campaign. The theme for this year's campaign is "Every Perfect Gift." Based on a verse from the Letter of James: "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift is from above" (James 1.17). Recognition that everything we have—our very lives, all the things we possess, all the people in our lives, the rich diversity of the world we call home, literally everything we have—is a gift from God. That this abundance reflects, even in a small way, the abundance of God's love for us. Throughout our campaign this year, each week will have its own theme, reflecting something of the ways in which we experience God's love, God's abundance. All this as a way of helping us to re-focus, to be more mindful about the variety of ways that God has blessed us in our everyday lives. Blessed us in great ways and in small. And then to invite us, with this renewed awareness, to consider how we wish to respond. Not just in terms of what we choose to give to St. Gregory's as a way of expressing gratitude for God's abundance. Not just as an expression of gratitude for how St. Gregory's hopefully facilitates and adds to our experience of God's love and abundance. But also, to help us become more mindful and more intentional about how we respond to God's abundance in all areas of our lives. How we might be able to recapture some of that childlike wonder and awe, that open-mindedness and open-heartedness, that allows us to more fully appreciate and receive the blessings that God showers on us. To live into Jesus' invitation to receive God's blessings as a little child.

¹ "One Flesh: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Nineteenth Week after Pentecost," SALT, September 28, 2021. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/10/3/one-flesh-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twentieth-week-after-pentecost>.