

“The Kingdom Belongs to Such as These”

Today’s Lectionary Gospel Reading is actually about two occasions in the public ministry of Jesus, instead of one. My intention was for this sermon to focus on the second of those two situations. However, since the Reading includes the first situation on the subject of divorce, I believe it is important that those verses be addressed before moving forward to examine the second occasion described in the Scripture.

Frankly, because the first situation is usually understood to reveal Jesus as having given a very difficult teaching on divorce, I usually do not include those verses. Today, after doing some additional research, I have decided to share some of my insights about the first portion of today’s Reading. The gospels of Mark and Matthew 19 have some significant differences in their reports about Jesus’ confrontation with the Pharisees on the subject of divorce. I believe those differences point to a better understanding of what actually took place on that occasion.

It is important to recall this conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees took place because they were trying to trap Jesus with a legal question. He did not, otherwise, state on his own, a teaching or commandment on the subject of divorce, so it seems doubtful Jesus put ordering everyone to remain married, unless the spouse had been unfaithful, as a high priority for his teachings.

I suspect the Pharisees and the other religious elites believed Jesus did not have much education, since he had not been a student of one of the Teachers of the Law. Thinking they could expose his educational deficiency and thus bring about his public demise, **Mark’s verse 2 said, “Some Pharisees came to him and tried to trap him. ‘Tell us,’ they asked, ‘does our Law allow a man to divorce his wife?’”** Mark’s account has Jesus turn the question back to the questioners in **verse 3, “Jesus answered with a question, ‘What law did Moses give you?’”** His answer might have been interpreted as a clever strategy to prevent the Pharisees’ question from trapping him – exposing his lack of training.

However, Matthew 19’s account does not include Mark’s verses 3 and 4 – did not include Jesus asking what law Moses gave them. Instead, Jesus transitioned their discussion to talk about the origins of a marriage between a man and a woman. **Matthew’s verses 4 through 6 reported, “Jesus answered, ‘Haven’t you read the scripture that says that in the beginning the Creator made people male and female? And God said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one.’ So they are no longer two, but one. No human being must separate, then, what God has joined together.”** It looks like Matthew’s version of Jesus’ initial response is the more accurate one, since it demonstrated Jesus’ intellectual abilities and his challenging of the skills of the Pharisees, who sought to trap him with their intellectual question.

On the other hand, **Mark’s verse 5 also reveals Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees’ position on divorce for “Jesus said to them, ‘Moses wrote this law for you because you are so hard to teach.’”** The actual Greek word literally means “hard heartedness” instead of “hard to teach”. It seems Jesus saw the Pharisees’ view about divorce as allowing self-centered and cruel husbands to cast away their wives at their whims. He did not condone such unjust behavior toward the Jewish wives, who were no more than second class citizens in Jewish culture. Indeed, Mark’s account in verses 6-9 went on to report Jesus also shared the same quote from Genesis about the husband leaving his parents and becoming one with his wife.

Both Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts reported Jesus’ disciples questioned him about his conversation with the Pharisees when they were alone in a house. Mark’s version has Jesus make, at that time, his prohibition against divorce, including making the wife’s divorcing of her husband equivalent to a husband’s divorcing of his wife. However, Mark’s version was an inaccurate attempt to portray Jesus as giving the same response a teacher of Roman Law would give, since Roman Law allowed both the wife or the husband to get a divorce. Jewish Law did not allow a Jewish wife to have the same rights of divorce as her husband did, so Jesus would not have made the comment about a wife divorcing her husband.

Matthew’s version of Jesus’ conversation with his disciples in the house, following his confrontation with the Pharisees on the subject of divorce, is more in line with how we see the disciples portrayed in the gospels. **In Matthew’s verses 9 and 10, “His disciples said to him, ‘If this is how it is between a man and his wife, it is better not to marry.’ Jesus answered, “This teaching does not apply to everyone, but only to those to whom God has given it.”** Jesus’ disciples were more in line with the male selfishness supported by the Pharisees’ position on divorce. When the disciples drew their negative conclusion about being married, if they could not be as selfish and unjust toward their wives as encouraged by the Pharisees, they saw little purpose in getting married. That then, led Jesus to reveal (pause) the emphasis on marriage between a man and a woman did not apply to everyone!

In verse 12 of Matthew's account Jesus said, *"For there are different reasons why men cannot marry (meaning marry a woman): some, because they were born that way; others, because men made them that way; and others do not marry for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. Let him who can accept this teaching do so."* Those words of Jesus are quite thought provoking when considered in the context of the controversy among Christians over the subject of same sex marriage. Jesus said some "were born that way" – when explain why his teaching about marriage and divorce between a man and a woman did not apply to everyone.

Now, let's turn to the second portion of our Scripture for today. This is the section I especially wanted to focus on for this message. Erskine White humorously wrote, "The experience of having children has made me far more sympathetic to the early Puritans who didn't use words like 'innate goodness' to describe human nature. They used words like 'total depravity.' Total depravity!" White asked, "Jesus said we are supposed to be like children to receive the kingdom of God?" **Erskine went on, "I can only join with millions of other parents and conclude that our Lord didn't know my kids when He made that statement."**

White continued, "When you walk into the bathroom and see an entire roll of brand new tissue paper lying in the toilet, it makes you wonder. When you see a whole pile of freshly washed and folded clothes lying all over the place like a tornado had hit, it makes you wonder. When you see your child sitting on the kitchen floor, trying to share her plate of food with the dog, it makes you wonder. And that's just the one-year-old at work! Imagine the three and the six-year-old when they put their talents together!"

White concludes, "Sometimes it makes you more than wonder; sometimes it makes you cry. Look at a group of kindergarteners some day and ask yourself: what can these kids teach us about receiving the kingdom of God?" (Erskine White, Together In Christ, CSS Publishing Company)

Whereas in the occasion alluded to in the first part of today's Reading, when the disciples were supportive of the Pharisees' interpretation of marriage and divorce being one in which the relationship between the husband and wife should be purely dependent on the whims – desires and self-centeredness of the husband, the reaction of the disciples to the bringing of the children to Jesus and his unhappiness with the children's mistreatment by his disciples point us toward a totally different way of living and relating. **In verses 13 through 15 Mark reported, "Some people brought children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples scolded the people. When Jesus noticed this, he was angry and said to his disciples, 'Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you that whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.'"**

Keith Wagner helps us name this way of living and relating – being such as a child by telling this story, "A new principal was checking over his school on the first day. Passing the stockroom, he was startled to see the door wide open and teachers going in and out, carrying off books and supplies. The school he came from had a check-out system that required the teachers to indicate what supplies they had obtained. Curious about the practice here he asked the school custodian, 'Do you think it's wise to keep the stockroom unlocked and to let the teachers take things without asking?' The custodian responded, 'We trust them with the children, don't we?'"

Wagner concludes, "Jesus wants us to trust in him and let the child within to be free. It is the only way to receive the kingdom of God. He wants us to give the child within the freedom to express itself, being creative, having fun and sharing emotions and feelings. He wants us to accept others who are different realizing that God makes us all and wants us to be genuine, authentic human beings." **Wagner declares, "The end result is absolute joy and the opportunity to experience life in its fullest."** (Keith Wagner, The Child Within)

Confirming Wagner's suggestion of Jesus calling us to live agape love toward everyone, as a child is open and loving toward those who welcome her or him, **Mark reported of Jesus in verse 16, "Then he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on each of them, and blessed them."** On this World Communion Sunday, let's – like children – be trusting of Jesus and open to his being God's Agape Love! **Like children, let's share agape love with one another and let us be open to the amazing new life to which Jesus calls us – the life of loving and welcoming all people, as he did during his public ministry and as many children do toward those, who show love to them.** Amen.