

The 20th Sunday after Pentecost
October 7, 2018
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Job 1:1; 2:1-10
Psalm 26
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, as you might know, is pretty fond of saying that Jesus came to help us turn this world from the nightmare it often is into the dream God intends. I think he probably said it when he was here a couple of years ago.

There are a few ways the Bible articulates God's dream for us and our world. Creation stories, for example, tell us of God's intentions *for* us and our world. And Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God, including the stories he told, was his way of telling us what God still resolves to do *with* us and our world ... if we but have ears to hear and hearts to respond.

I find it particularly striking, therefore, to notice that in this morning's gospel Jesus both refers us *back* to creation and points us *ahead* to the kingdom of God. I think he must be inviting us to imagine how God intended things to be, "from the beginning," in order to help us imagine how the world might yet be once more, when God's will is finally done here on earth as in heaven. Both are ways of getting at God's dream for us and for our world.

Now that's not what the Pharisees were asking about that day when they came and asked Jesus a vexing question about divorce. But it wasn't an honest question. They came to "test" Jesus. But in any event, Jesus, it seems to me, had little interest in powerful men looking to use the law to preserve the privileges of other powerful men ... at the expense of women and children.

The first thing I think we need to know is that marriage in 1st century Israel – and indeed just about everywhere until very recently – wasn't the same institution as what we've taken to be the norm in our own time and place. In many parts of the world, arranged marriages are still the norm.

People didn't marry for love; they married because their parents (most typically) wanted an alliance between their families or there was some kind of deal struck. And at least in Jesus' time, the women being married had the least say in those negotiations.

And women had the least say in divorce as well.

There's a hint at the disparity in what the Pharisees ask and say. They ask Jesus if it's okay for a man to divorce his wife. And they respond to Jesus question, recalling how "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." Notice that the woman has no say in any of this. The Pharisees only talk about what a man can do, what a man can get away with.

And a man could get away with a lot.

Officially, the standard was that the husband could only write that “certificate of dismissal” if he found some “indecency” in his wife. But it’s a vague term. It could mean infidelity on her part. It could mean that she burned his supper.

And the wife had no say, no recourse. And once divorced and cast aside, the woman would have lost status, reputation, legal standing, economic security ... pretty much everything!

The import of Jesus’ response, I think, is how he deflects the original question from matters of the law and what men can do – or get away with – and focuses on God’s dream for all of us.

When Jesus hearkens back to God’s intentions for us, “from the beginning,” he sees a world of mutuality and equality. “God made them male and female,” Jesus says, quoting from the first chapter of Genesis, which is clear to say that God created them, each bearing the image of God.

And Jesus goes on to the second chapter of Genesis: a husband leaves *his* father and mother – which is to say *his* family, *his* livelihood, *his* safety net – and joins himself to his wife (and her family). The image is not of a woman giving her power over to a man, but rather of a man severing all his ties to his old life to join himself to a woman. Caring for one another – loving the other as oneself, since they were now deemed one flesh – was the only way it could work. That dream of God is a stunning repudiation of what was taken to be normative in Jesus’ day.

Jesus is not so very interested in what the law allows men to do, so he digs down beneath the letter of any law to get back to God’s intended purpose for all of us to be in relationships that support one another, to care for one another, to protect those who need it the most.

The Pharisees would surely not have liked Jesus’ response. And it would have been clear to them, I think, that he never really answered the question they asked him.

Jesus’ response, it seems to me, actually goes far beyond any of their questions about divorce ... and beyond our questions about marriage or divorce, as well. I think Jesus is concerned ultimately with all our human relationships – all of them intended by God to be full of mutual care and respect, especially for the least among us.

And that’s the importance of what happens next. People bring children to Jesus, asking him to touch them. And Jesus’ disciples are getting in the way. They echo the Pharisees.

We heard a story like this here a couple of weeks ago. As I said to you then, we should realize that children weren’t particularly valued the same way we value them today. They were generally tolerated more than welcomed, so long as they were seen and not heard.

But Jesus rebuffed the disciples then, as he does this time once again. And Jesus welcomes the unwanted children once more into his arms and he blesses them.

And I'm struck that as Jesus welcomes the children this morning, he speaks about the kingdom of God, that dream that God has for us and for our world. Jesus says that the kingdom of God "belongs" to them ... or, in other words, that God's dream for us and our world cannot come into being without children. All God's children belong.

From start to finish, Jesus has little patience with those who posture about law and order, not when it's invoked by powerful men to protect people like themselves at the expense of God's beloved children.

No, Jesus insists that we were made to work together, on behalf of all God's children ... and indeed all God's creation. From the beginning of creation, we were made for each other.

And "... what God has joined together, let no one separate."

We all are joined together.

We all belong.

At our later service, we'll bless animals. And we'll sing a song about "God's critters." (I'll let you in on a secret. It's not just about animals. It's about you and me, and how all of us belong.)

I should probably show a little discretion and NOT ask you all to sing here at the early service, but why should the folks who come later have all the fun? Let's sing a little here too.

Refrain All God's critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
And some just clap their hands, or paws or anything they got now

Well, listen to the bass, it's the one on the bottom
Where the bullfrog croaks and the hippopotamus
Moans and groans with a big to do
And the old cow just goes, 'Moo'

Well, the dogs and the cats they take up the middle
The honeybee hums and the crickets fiddle
The donkey brays and the pony neighs
The old coyote howls

Refrain All God's critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
And some just clap their hands, or paws or anything they got now

Well, listen to the top where the little bird sings
The melody with the high voice ringing
The hoot owl hollers over everything
And the jaybird disagrees

Singing in the nighttime, singing in the day
The little duck quacks and he's on his way
The 'possum don't have much to say
And the porcupine talks to herself

Refrain All God's critters got a place in the choir
 Some sing low, some sing higher
 Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
 And some just clap their hands, or paws or anything they got now

Everybody here is a part of the plan
We all get to play in the great critter band
From the eagle in the sky to the whale in the sea
It's one great symphony

Refrain All God's critters got a place in the choir
 Some sing low, some sing higher
 Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
 And some just clap their hands, or paws or anything they got now