

Thomas R. Cook
Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 a.m. Celebration of the Holy Eucharist
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost; October 7, 2018

“Like a Child”

Scripture: Mark 10:2-16; 20 Pentecost B (Proper 22B RCL)
Note: Preached only during the 9:00 service of Holy Eucharist. Animal Blessing at 11:15 a.m.

“Is it lawful,” the Pharisees ask Jesus, “for a man to divorce his wife?...”

“Restlessness causes the mind to wander.

You pace the floor wondering what next to do to bring the passion back to your life.

You try this and that, but nothing satisfies.

Then the thought emerges, ‘Perhaps a different person...’

I’ve tried to imagine why it is that Jesus so enthusiastically welcomes the little children that people are bringing to him. Those darn kids will just get in the way of the actual important business, you know. I suppose that is why the disciples want to stop them from coming to Jesus, because they would just interrupt the Master in a moment of great significance, a moment when he is expounding upon the wisdom of the Almighty. *Wait! He’s holding forth on marriage and divorce. Who’s side will he take? Will he hold up the bargain for men, or...?* ...But really I figure Jesus just wants to welcome the children, because he is so entirely weary of his stubborn, bull-headed, mostly male,

¹ Martin, William; The Couple’s Tao Te Ching. Marlowe and Company (New York), 2000. Page 43.

entitled, adult companions. *Thank God for these kids! Get 'em over here, please. Would that you all were more... like... them!*

Jesus is tired, and he's tired of it. Is it not enough that he struggles with this faithless generation who doesn't seem to understand him at all, not enough that his own friends fuss at him for sharing with them that he has to die in Jerusalem so he might rise again, not enough that they just argue amongst themselves about which if them is the greatest, not enough that they are worried about their own power and prestige? Is all that not enough already? And then the Pharisees have to come along and pepper him with their patriarchal and misogynistic legal questions about who has what right to do what to whom in a failing marriage. And his disciples still don't get it... [Sigh] *Life is not just all about what you want. What about others' needs? What about love? And patience, and fidelity, and humility, and kindness, and hopefulness? Sure, Moses let you send your wives away, but only because he couldn't put up with your darn stubbornness. You would have put them away anyway. And that isn't what God wills for you; it never has been.*

“Restlessness causes the mind to wander.

You pace the floor wondering what next to do to bring the passion back to your life.

You try this and that, but nothing satisfies.

Then the thought emerges, 'Perhaps a different person...'

*“...Instead be still and calm your fears.
Let the restlessness run its course and fade.
When it passes, your beloved will still be there
And your love will flame anew.”²*

Make no mistake... the Pharisees aren't so much concerned about marriage as they are about getting their way. Even they are not entirely in agreement on what constitutes a legal reason for divorce, and so they put Jesus to the test. And instead of taking sides, instead of giving in to their hardness of heart, instead of neglecting the women who are half of the marriage equation, he tells those Pharisees what they have known all along, but they haven't wanted to accept... When God has made the marriage, who are we to take it apart?

*“Faithfulness in a relationship is not so much a product of willpower, as of patience.
Patiently let the storms of your mind blow past without uprooting you.
[Then] your thoughts will always return to your beloved.”³*

Yes, Jesus preaches the ideal. From the beginning, he says, God intended that a couple live as one in marriage, together, one flesh, helping each other, loving each other... for life. But just because we can't always make it happen, does that mean we must grow bitter to the ideal, become cynical in our relationships, make enemies of our partners, put someone away in acrimonious or thoughtless divorce? Remember,

² Ibid. Page 43.

³ Ibid. Page 44.

in Jesus' day a husband could simply dismiss a wife with little or no thought to cause or reason. Not so for the wife. It is likely that only the richest and most powerful of women could put away their spouses... the queens, the consorts of the governors and princes and generals. Not so for the ordinary woman. She had only her husband's good will upon which to depend. And her hope that God's will for her be done. And Jesus was only asking that his people try ---earnestly, honestly --- try to live the ideal. And how might we approach that, how might we live more in the image of God? Well... *Let the little children come to me; do not stop them. Look at them, for to such as these the Kingdom of God belongs.*

“Play with each other as children do.

Laugh and sing and skip.

Tumble in each other's arms and squeal with delight.

Play games without a thought to winning or losing.

Play with words and make each other laugh.

Play with each other's bodies, and make each other sigh.

It is your playfulness that [shows the way].”⁴

Or have we forgotten how to be to one another like a beloved child? To live, laugh, play, and suffer, yet still deeply, thankfully love? It's the children that bring Jesus hope. That's why I believe, that in the middle of all this serious adult talk about marriage and divorce, about perception and permission, about power and rights for stubborn and willful men, Jesus asks to spend time with the children.

⁴ Ibid. Page 102.

Look, I know children aren't perfect... but they can be pretty refreshing, and they are open to possibility. Yet those of us who have carried some burden of the years are certainly no longer children entirely. We've had to experience the limits of our abilities and sometimes the heartaches that go with that. And some of us have learned that marriages do end, sometimes despite our best efforts. That may not meet the ideal, but it is a reality. And I don't believe that Jesus' teaching is meant to condemn us in our failures or our finiteness. Rather, I believe Jesus is calling us to reach for holiness, to be patient and steadfast in relationship, to stay firm, to be open minded and open hearted like a child to the possibilities for a lifetime of creativity and fidelity.

*** **

Throughout these reflections, I've shared with you words from one of my spiritual mentors, Bill Martin, and these from his contemplation on the Way for couples. I want to close with some of Bill's encouraging words for those of you who share your lives with another in marriage, or who hope to some day, or who walk now with someone in a lifelong and committed way. Bill offers:

Committing your life to another person is a great change,

Filled with both loss and gain.

You lose some independence; you gain a world of love.

Gaining a world of love, you fear its loss.

But you need not be afraid.

[Love] contains all loss, all gain, and it contains each of you as well.⁵

You know, Jesus isn't asking us to be children, but it can't be all that bad to trust God like a child. After all, it was a child that he welcomed, took into his arms, and blessed. I like that.

⁵ Ibid. Page 110.