

Proper 22 B 2021

Genesis 2:18-24

Psalm 8

Mark 10:2-16

As we begin,
Let's let Jesus take control of the narrative.
Here's what he's all about:
The call to turn around,
Trust the goodness at the heart of life,
And live in the truth of love,
Which is known in self-offering,
Reconciliation, and hope.
This is the good news
He went out on the road to preach.

Don't let the naysayers,
The critics,
Those who want to entrap him and get rid of him,
Grab the focus.

This is not their story.
This story belongs to Jesus,
The holy one of God,
And to us,
Who accept his invitation to come and see,
And go forth into the world bearing his name.

Don't be distracted
By the questions of his detractors.
In the difficult passage about divorce we are given for today,
Stand with Jesus,
In that sure and certain place where he is grounded.
His life stands on the rock
Of the one in whom he lives and moves and has his being,
The God whom he calls Father.
He knows that God in the words of scripture,
In the compassion that flows from his own heart,
In the prophetic truth that impels him to speak and act,
And most of all,
In the depths of prayer
To which he returns over and over.

So, when his adversaries come to him,
Hoping, once again,

To trick him into saying something
That could get him killed,
He is ready.

So now, standing with him,
Sheltered by his wisdom,
Free of hurt and anxiety and malice,
Let's take a look at what is happening,
And what it might mean for us today.

Jesus is not very interested in divorce, in and of itself.
He never brings it up
Except when someone asks him a question –
And none of those questions are sincere.

Jesus is, though, interested in power and vulnerability,
In justice,
And in compassion.

And he is clever in conversation,
A master in debate,
And his knowledge of scripture is complete.

So, when his adversaries ask him a question to test and trap him,
He first, as he so often does,
Asks a question in his turn,
A question that changes the context of the conversation.
A question about the law
Becomes a conversation about hardness of heart.
And that's a question for all of us.

What keeps us connected with the source of life?
How do we lose our way?
How can we return?

Jesus takes us away from the legal question
Into the wonder of our beginnings,
The story of creation,
The foundation myth of Genesis that tells us who we are
In our life with God.

This doesn't solve all the problems,
But it sets us in a different plane,
Where we can have more fruitful conversations.

The Genesis story,

At its heart,
Is about human identity,
And the wondrous diversity of creation,
And our relationships with each other.

In other times and places,
We understood this story to establish norms,
And hierarchies,
And even to set firm boundaries of gender identity.
But we are coming to understand
That this story,
Which never grows old,
Contains within its seemingly narrow frame
Abundant seeds of liberation and new possibility.

The Genesis story
Might seem to establish a rigid hierarchy.
But that's only when we tell it
And hear it with the boundaries of our cultural assumptions
Firmly in place.
If we approach the myth of our human beginnings
With fresh ears and eyes,
We may find in it
A story of inventiveness and delight,
Of longing and fulfillment,
Of partnership and mutuality.

Jesus reminds us of that vision,
Brings us back in touch with that truth.
At our core, we are
Images of the living God,
Little lower than the angels,
As the psalm says.
We are capable and responsible
And playful and delightful,
Worthy of the task of caring for the world
That has been placed into our hands.

That vision is precious.
It is the essence of what it means
To be in relationship with the holy.

And the vision is broken.
In human relationships,
In stewardship of creation,
In imagination and will,

We fall short.

Much as we want to live in loving partnership,
There are times when those partnerships become a trap,
A hindrance to our flourishing,
And we have to sunder the relationship.

Much as we love the image of creation
In all its wondrous forms,
Much as we bear within us the capacity to care for the planet,
Our choices fail to promote that abundance of life.

We are, the psalmist says, little lower than the angels,
and yet we fall so short.

What can be done?
First, take hope.
The world we have remade in our broken image,
Shaped by our hardness of heart,
Still carries within it the kingdom of heaven.

And that's where Jesus invites us to go –
To the kingdom within and around us.
That's his mission,
And it leads to his passion.

Every time someone tries to turn him aside,
With questions designed to promote their own agenda,
He leads them to an encounter with truth,
Whether they can hear it or not.
When it's over,
He turns to what really matters to him:
The kingdom of heaven,
And how we live within it.

There will always be trick questions,
People who want to trap Jesus,
Or use him, or dismiss him.
It could be divorce,
It could be reproductive rights,
It could be economic justice or reparations.
These questions,
And the way we misuse Jesus' answers,
Can cause real harm,
And looking at his answers fresh
Can bring liberation.

How can we, like Jesus,
Keep the main thing the main thing?

Jesus always returns to scripture,
His is always grounded in prayer,
He always looks at the real person,
Right in front of him,
With compassion.

For some of us,
The question about divorce is very real,
And the apparent condemnation Jesus offers is painful,
And can lead to years of suffering.
For some of us,
The Genesis story
With its seeming establishment of rigid gender norms,
And even gender identities,
Can lead to a sense of isolation and alienation.
These are real issues,
And because Jesus cares about our suffering,
And our sense of belonging,
He offers us a way through.

The way through is his embrace and his blessing.
It is there for all of us.
All of us,
Weary, worn and sad.
Frustrated, frightened, and lonely.
Anxious and uncertain.
In these times,
As in every time,
He is there for us.

Look at today's story.
When his adversaries with their tricky question depart,
Perhaps disappointed,
Perhaps, a few of them,
Wondering in a new way,
As soon as they are gone,
The people who love and revere Jesus return,
With their genuine longings and simple, sincere request.
Bless our children.

We can lose the real Jesus,

And his call to all of us,
If we can't follow the thread of today's story to the end.
The story ends with a child in the arms of Jesus.
The story ends with the kingdom of God
In the arms of a little child.

You may think of innocence when you see that child.
You may think of vulnerability.
You may think of possibility,
Or of play.

Here's the most important part,
Or at least it seems that way to me, today:
See the child,
Not as a symbol,
But as a person.
You.

We all start out as children.
We all start out with the capacity
To receive the kingdom of God.
We all start out with the capacity
To embrace the promise of God.

Things happen along the way:
Transitions in identity and body,
Divorce,
Illness.
We wound others, betray them,
Disappoint them,
And are wounded and betrayed and disappointed in our turn.

But the child is still within,
Maybe bubbling with joy,
Maybe hiding in fear.
But the child is there,
And Jesus will take that child into his arms,
And bless the child.
Bless you.

There are plenty of trick questions in our story of now.
We could get lost or entangled,
Lose the thread of the real story.
But remember,
Jesus can find us here,
Speak to the heart of our being,

Find the child that lives within,
Bless us,
And set us to find our way to the kingdom
That is already here,
Waiting to be found.