

Proper 22 B 2018

Genesis 2:18-24

Psalm 8

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Mark 10:2-16

What a time this is.

There were other times –
Earlier times,
Some of them easier times –
When the lessons we were given for today
Led a preacher
Down almost inevitable paths
To obvious sermons.

Times when Jesus' saying about divorce
And the lesson from Genesis
Would lead a preacher to simple conclusions.

But these are not those times.

In fact
There could hardly be a time more fraught
For hearing the lessons
We are given for today.
Why, at this time of all times,
Could we not have had
A nice, pleasing parable that slips down easily
And only unfolds later?
Or a story of healing and new life?
Words of comfort and joy?

Instead, we have these:
Gender, gender relations,
Hardness of heart,
And underneath all of these,
What it means to be human.

In the wake of the Supreme Court confirmation hearings,
And the subsequent vote,
And now, the swearing in of a new justice,
How are we to hear the lesson from Genesis,
our foundation myth,
The story of God bringing forth living creatures

From the dust of earth and the flesh of flesh?
A story that establishes gender,
And coupling,
As the basic norms of human existence?

However we feel,
Whatever we think,
About the nomination,
The accusations,
The final outcome,
I would venture that many,
Most of us
Are dismayed
By the way the whole sordid drama played out,
What it revealed about our common life,
Our assumptions,
Our elected officials,
The state of our union.

Whatever we think about the truth
Of the specific case,
What do we make of the flood of memories,
The reawakening of trauma,
The deep wells of shame,
Or guilt,
Of fear and anger,
That have overwhelmed us?

What might this story offer us?

And then,
In this time when gender relations
Are a source of bitterness and strife,
beyond the spectacle that has unfolded in Washington,
We have the very question of gender itself,
A question that seems old as humankind,
And yet reveals new truth in our own time.

Once upon a time,
We heard the lesson from Genesis
As normative in all times and places,
And we made assumptions
About how intimate relationships,
And human societies,
Should be ordered.
We believed the words of scripture

Blessed and sanctified
A certain power structure,
Which, for shorthand,
We'll call patriarchy.

Over time,
Some have come to recognize
That even this seemingly clear message,
a certain order of gender relations
established by God in creation,
Is not demanded by the text.
The Genesis story,
Read closely and through a different lens,
Contains within it the seeds of liberation
And radical re-ordering.
But this is not a lecture on liberation theologies
Or feminist interpretation.
We're here to search even deeper
For a word that might unite and inspire us all,
Beyond personal experience or politics.
How do we hear this story, today?
Is it everyone's story,
As we have always thought?
Who's not here in the words of the story?
Lots of people.

Not everyone is part of a couple.
Not everyone is heterosexual.
Not everyone
Is male or female.
But we all belong in the story.
All of us.

Now that many of us
Have begun to recognize
That some of God's children—
Made in the image and likeness
Of a transcendent and mysterious holy one
Who is intimately, actively engaged
In the pain and wonder of life¹ --
Some of God's children
Are gender non-binary,
Gender fluid, gender non-conforming,
Gender queer,
Now that we begin to recognize this truth,
Not only in our own time,

But in the traces of the past,
How do we hear this lesson?

And how might it bring us insight,
Comfort, inspiration,
Or conviction
In this time of all times?

At other times
In the history of the church
This story from Genesis
Has helped keep the boundaries firm,
The roles clear,
The rules and norms intact.
But what about now?

There is still a power in this story,
A power to show all of us
What it means to be human,
And perhaps even to find a way through this current hour.

Underneath everything we hear first,
Everything that is affirming to some of us,
And excludes others of us,
There is this truth:
We are made of the stuff of earth,
Enlivened by the breath of the holy,
And we are made to be together.
Maybe in couples,
Maybe alone but in community,
Maybe in companionship
With the creatures given into our care,
But we are meant to recognize in each other
Our absolute kinship,
Our oneness.

We are bound together,
Made of the same stuff,
Bone of each other's bone
And flesh of each other's flesh.
The story does not say
We must agree with each other,
But it does tell us
That we are all related.
How then,
Should we treat each other?

What should we demand of our leaders?
What should we offer to those with whom we disagree?

The Genesis story sets a pattern for human relations,
A pattern different from what we have often assumed.
A pattern that would serve us well,
In these troubled, contentious, bitter times.
We are bone of bone,
Flesh of flesh.

What happens,
When we take that wisdom
Into our hearing of the gospel?
The very difficult passage about divorce,
A passage that we, in our tradition,
Have chosen to move beyond,
In our thinking, and our teaching,
And our practice.

Though it's very present for some among us,
And will always be,
The question of divorce
Is not, here and now,
A preoccupation for our community.
But what about hardness of heart?
What about welcoming the child?
What do these tell us
About who we can be,
How we should act?

And then,
Just to add more layers,
We have the wisdom of the psalm and the second lesson,
Telling us that to be human
Means to be
Little lower than the angels.
Stewards of the created order.

Have we been faithful
To that responsibility and privilege?
We have only to take in,
Try to comprehend,
The latest news about climate change
To know how unworthy we have proven to be,
How we have scuttled the sacred trust
Placed into our hands

By the creator
Who formed us out of dust
To rule and serve the creatures of earth.

Gender, gender relations,
Climate change,
none of this brings the comfort
We so badly need.

But –
Because God can be known in scripture,
As in the wonders of nature and the mystery of prayer
And the reality of the sacraments,
Let's trust,
If we can,
That somewhere in these lessons
We can find
A word of comfort,
A glimmer of hope,
A door into the beyond.

So, let's try this,
As a lens though which to see
A bewildering group of lessons.

What if we look at them
As lessons about power?

We all have power,
Because we are human,
Little lower than the angels,
With creation set into our hands
To rule and serve.
We have power because we are thinking,
Imagining, inventive creatures.
We have power because we know what it is to love,
And because hope has been put into our hearts.

This is true,
And though we can forget this knowledge,
Or have it wither,
Nothing can take it away.

And, at the same time,
Some have more power than others,
And some use that power for harm,

Intentionally or unwittingly.
We misuse our power.

Jesus knows this,
And when he speaks against divorce,
He speaks against a situation where unequal power
Leaves the more powerful with choices
And the less powerful trapped without choices.
In his world,
And not only in his world,
Divorce left a woman friendless and alone,
Impoverished and isolated,
Sometimes faced with a choice
Between starvation or prostitution.

So in this case,
As in so many cases,
Why would Jesus not condemn the powerful
For their hardness of heart?

And then, into the midst of this difficult,
Uncomfortable lesson,
He sets a child.
The least powerful,
Most vulnerable,
In a society,
Then as now,
Built around power,
The seizing, maintaining,
And wielding of power.

What do these lessons tell us,
About how to live in these times,
As people of faith?

It seems to me
That one thing these lessons show us
Is how radically counter culture
God calls us to be.
What a different way God shows us
Of being in the world.

We live in a world
That is still rigidly ordered
Along gender lines
And power lines –

Mostly overlapping.

Genesis shows us,
Beyond this,
That our most basic nature is relational,
That we find fulfillment in
Greeting our fellow human beings
With recognition and joy.

And the gospel shows us
That it is only in giving up power,
Binding ourselves to others
In relationships of trust and vulnerability,
That we enter into the promise of God.

These are not easy lessons.
These are not easy times.

But I would invite you,
As I have challenged myself,
To take these lessons,
Not only into your interactions with those near you,
But into your reflections
On the events of the day.

What would it look like
To have a Senate
Where fellow human beings were vulnerable with each other?
What would it look like to have leaders
Who recognized their kinship
With every living being?

What would it look like
To welcome and accept all God's children
As they are?

It sounds to me,
Perhaps,
Like the beginning
Of the renewal of the world.

ⁱ Cf. Rahner, “[Grace is] ... the patient, luminous, and inviting presence of a transcendent and mysterious God intimately active in the pain and glory of life.”