

19th Sunday after Pentecost 3 October 2021

Genesis 2:18-24 / Psalm 8 / Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12 / Mark 10:2-16

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Well, today promises to be a beautiful day for the blessing of the animals at noon, one of our favorite community activities. And our readings this morning teach us about the nature of community, and what we can bring to and receive from the community of faith.

What a good place to start, with the story of Adam and Eve from the Hebrew scriptures. We heard about how humans are created to be “in relationship,” or in community with each other. This is a passage that, sadly, has been used sometimes to describe women as a weaker sex, which colors their expectations from marriage, and to bar people who identify as LGBTQIA+ from the expression of human community that we call marriage. For that matter, pigeonholing these groups also affects heterosexual men by narrowing the expression of their masculine identity.

So God’s creation of humans to be in community with each other can get twisted. We saintly and sinning people can turn what God intends for good into something else again. This portion of the creation story is also read by some to describe more

than what happens just to humans who aren't in community – it may also include the flora and fauna of creation, all that God has made.

This is a reading we can get hung up on, that may trouble us. Another challenging reading is today's gospel, which has been taken by some groups of Christians to be a pronouncement on divorce.

So let's try and put the gospel into context to understand it better. Yesterday in confirmation class, we talked about how learning the context of Jesus' place and time may enrich our understanding of the New Testament. We touched on factors like Israel's access to the sea and travel, and its history of being controlled by different empires over the centuries, bringing in different cultures and beliefs.

Today's gospel reading comes after a few weeks of stories from Saint Mark's Gospel forecasting Jesus' death and resurrection. And we've also heard about the disciples trying to figure out who would be greatest in Jesus' kingdom, them trying to stop people outside their group from casting out demons, and even trying to keep kids away from Jesus.

In each case Jesus reframed the issue and called his followers to a wider mercy and understanding. And in today's story we see how humans can turn inward, to

isolate, and act against each other. Our tendencies can lead us to form rules and regulations that keep people from full participation in their communities.

This morning the Pharisees ask Jesus not so much about divorce, as about interpreting the law. They want to test Jesus about the law and use divorce as the example.

Back in Jesus' time, everyone agreed divorce was legal, but they didn't all agree on the circumstances when it could happen. The Pharisees are really talking about how laws keep civilization in order, with structures that protect people. And from their point of view, Jesus has been pretty free with breaking laws: he feeds everyone instead of just a few, heals illnesses that are associated with sin, praises the faith of foreigners like the Syrophenician woman.

So, let's say divorce is one example of the order that's created by law, and the Pharisees want to see where Jesus will go in his answer.

Jesus puts the emphasis back where it belongs, on God's intent behind the law, which is that humans flourish when they live in relationship. Our relationships are more than legal matters – they help us to have and share abundant life. Jesus brings

up the creation story to show God's intent for humans to live in relationships of mutual dependence and health.

And he takes it further, pointing that this law, like all laws, are created to protect the vulnerable. Now, in Jesus' day when a woman was divorced she lost her status, reputation, and fell into economic ruin, so he asks how this can be right. When we use laws meant to protect the vulnerable against them, we're moving away from God's plan and are violating the spirit of the law.

Jesus teaches that marriage is meant to be a partnership – they are no longer two, but one. And he treats men divorcing their wives under the same criteria as women divorcing their husbands. No one had even thought to ask about the possibility of equal status and opportunity of both parties in a divorce!

Maybe we can more fully understand today's gospel in light of the end of the story, when Jesus welcomes children and their parents. We don't know anything about these adults bringing kids who are referred to as "they," except that the disciples try to keep them away from Jesus.

He intervenes and proclaims that welcoming the kingdom – the same kingdom where the disciples wondered who would be the greatest – welcoming the kingdom

meant welcoming children, welcoming those who were vulnerable and in need.

Jesus tells the disciples that the adults – parents, single parents, divorced women, whoever – are allowed to bring their children to him. That these children, at risk and dependent, are those to whom the kingdom of God belongs.

This would have shocked Jesus' community then and might shock his community today. Yes, the law is important, as is marriage, and divorce represents a tearing apart of something blessed by God. Everyone who's been through a divorce or near one knows this. But what is news – good news – is that God cares deeply for those who've been torn apart, who are alone and hurting.

Today's gospel is about the community of the broken, not of the strong or powerful. It's a community of people who know they're in need and want to be in relationship with others. For when we are in honest and open relationship with each other, we are in relationship with God.

The Church was originally a place for people who'd been broken by life or rejected by others, who came there to experience God through Jesus, the One who met them in their vulnerability. Not to build them up so they'd never be harmed again, but to open them to the brokenness and need of others around them.

It can be hard for us to remember that. Paul had to remind the Corinthians:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

Part of our humanness is our insecurity, knowing our need and feeling embarrassed by it in a society that prefers strength and power. Saint Paul reminds us that to be broken is simply to be human. And being human means to be loved by God and drawn into relationship with all the others God loves.

Let us think of today's gospel reading not as instruction about divorce, but an invitation to know our communities as places where God's work to heal and restore all of creation is ongoing. For we are communities of the broken and blessed.

A central teaching of Scripture is God's presence among the hurting and the dispossessed. God's Church is where we should find grace and support and love.

We can relax and acknowledge our vulnerability and need, as God heals us and uses us to make all things new.

One of Jesus' primary messages is revealing God's plan and great desire since the start of creation for humans not to be alone. So each time we try and narrow the path, or partly close the door of welcome, Jesus stretches our hearts wider, to include the people who have been dehumanized, excluded and left alone because of sin, theirs and ours.

Today Jesus invites all to bring our broken selves, who mess up the search for community so often and in so many ways, to the table, to come together and receive his love.

God's mysterious, miraculous love and forgiveness are as broad as Jesus' arms, outstretched to receive and bless the children. May we live into our relationships with the same faithfulness and welcome we see in the crucified and risen Christ, who invites every little one and every belittled one into his arms.

To him together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.