

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Proper 22 Year B
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

So what are we to do with this text, we who are divorced and remarried?

Do we take these texts literally and believe that for those who have found life and found it abundantly in a new relationship after a former covenantal relationship was severed will never enter into the Kingdom of God? And if so, then what's the point for us to keep coming to church and striving to live faithfully, to stretch and grow in our love of God, if divorce is an insurmountable barrier to living in the place of the presence of God?

What if divorce was something that happened to you, that you weren't really given a choice about, does your soul still suffer a separation from God forever? Or what if divorce frees a victim from his or her abuser, does a marriage after that release from bondage still count as adultery, and therefore means that person is not, nor ever can, live in a right relationship with God?

This text and the 2nd account of the creation story referenced by Jesus, when a rib is taken from the man to create woman and the woman's role is to be a helper to, and often misinterpreted as not "a partner with the man", can be used by some religious people and denominations to make clear that the right order of the universe is male domination over women and absolute sanctity of marriage, between a man and a woman, with no wiggle room allowed for grace.

However, this isn't where Jesus goes with the answer to the question, "Is divorce permissible?" and I think it's always wise to follow Jesus, don't you?

Jesus doesn't address the legality of divorce. Everyone in the conversation already knows the answer to the Pharisees' question. Divorce was common and legal under both Roman and Hebraic law, although there was a difference. Under Roman law, both the man and woman could initiate a divorce. Under Hebraic law at Jesus' time, only the man was given that privilege.

In answer to their question, Jesus, immediately and characteristically, shifts the attention from the legalistic, proscriptive stance about the lawfulness of divorce and directs our attention to thinking more broadly about what it is that God intends for all people. So suddenly, we're all in this conversation about God's desire for us to be in relationship with each other and what that is to look like.

The first creation story in Genesis focuses on humankind being made in God's image, and therefore instructs us on our value, our inherent "goodness", and calls us to become the best of who we are, so that our lives can be a mirror to God's glory.

The second creation story, which Jesus references today, is all about relationships and the proper character of those relationships, whether they be between men and women, men and men, women and women, parent and child, brother and sister, friend to friend, co-worker to co-worker, disciple to disciple.

Jesus reminds us that we are hard-wired to be in deep relationship with each other. We are to experience what some may call the spiritual truth of communion: the place where God resides in the joining together of folks to a common purpose, in a place of peace experienced which tells you this relationship is exactly right, and in a union which embodies a sense of “joining energy” that is the essence of God.

We learn of this in the Hebrew word, ezer, found in the 2nd Genesis account, which is accurately translated as helper. But to get a full sense of the meaning of this word, we need to look at how it’s used in its original context. We find ezer 19 times in the Hebrew scriptures; and of those times, 12 are references to God, where God is the helper, which certainly points to the fact that the one who is the helper is not subservient to the one who is in need of help, but is actually the liberator. Likewise, when the word does refer to persons in the scripture, it is referring to someone who can deliver another from a predicament or a position of powerlessness.

So we are one another’s helper.

I think the Hollies got it right when they sang back in the 70’s – He’s not heavy, he’s my brother. The lyrics go on to speak of how the road is long and we don’t always know where we’re going, but I’m strong enough to carry him, for he’s my brother.

We are each other’s helpers, whom God has designed so that we may be delivered from the predicament which all humans need saving from at some points in their lives: loneliness.

Unlike in the 1st creation story in Genesis, when God’s constant refrain of “And it was good” reminds us of the inherent goodness in each step of the design and proclamation of creation, all was not good in the 2nd creation story, in which only one person resided. God, in God’s mercy, yearned to solve the predicament of loneliness and to create a helper, a partner, for every human person. God’s acknowledged that God’s presence alone was not enough. And this action of God is key to our understanding of human relationships. For God allowed Adam, Adam in Hebrew, appropriately translated as “a human”, to choose his partner, to have the final word to whom he would say, “Ah.... At last, this is the bone of my bone, the flesh of my flesh”.

This beautiful narrative reminds us that God has placed within each one of us the desire to find someone, or a community of people, to which we bind ourselves spiritually, in connection where God can reside.

And when this spiritual bond has been formed, and if it is then ruptured, there is a separation, which deepens into a loneliness, which can shake one's world. If and when this happens to us, it is heart breaking. This soul-shattering loneliness can happen within a marriage that continues on; it can happen when a marriage ends; it can happen when someone we love dies; it can happen when, because of harsh words spoken foolishly, a long-term friendship is severed; it can happen within a parish family, when members die, move away, or choose to worship elsewhere; it can happen to each one of us in a multitude of ways.

One of the mothers of a college student shot down on the Oregon campus is quoted as saying, "Our lives are shattered beyond repair". I suspect there is a deep loneliness, which has settled into her bones and the very core of her being, to reside there forever. Her "joining energy, which is the essence of God" she shared with her bright, loving son, appears to have been severed.

I believe Jesus is saying in our text today that this is not God's intention for us. This sense of rupture of relationship is not only uncomfortable and debilitating for many, it portrays the rupture, which Jesus came to heal: that which occurs between and among people and that which happens between humankind and God.

Jesus is saying, I know your loneliness. I feel your pain. Let me heal you. Let me take your hand and bring you into the new creation, which you can become through my love.

Now remember, we are in the gospel of Mark, where everything is urgent and immediate. We're on our way with Jesus to the cross, we're nearing Jerusalem, and Jesus is saying clearly, when he's talking about welcoming children into our midst, that things have changed radically. We are living now in a kingdom-enhanced world, which I am ushering in for you. We can almost hear Jesus saying to his disciples, Things have changed. Get with it! Your focus needs to be shifted. It's not about laws and what you can get away with, or who you can push away; it's about un-hardening your hearts to the power of love. It's the hardening of hearts, which ruptures relationships.

Theologian Paul Tillich asserts God is love; and love is the power that drives everything there is toward everything else there is – love is about spiritual communion.

Jesus is saying this spiritual communion needs to be our focus now. Jesus offers us this through his life, ministry, death, and resurrection ~ and through the bread and wine we receive today. We are all invited into this place of spiritual communion, with all of humanity, with all of creation, and, on this Feast Day of St. Francis, we acknowledge, also with our loving pets.

Jesus is waiting for us to see it, believe it, and most importantly live it.

We know there are times when relationships end; when divorce papers are served, when friends are deleted from our contact list; when people slip into the next world without us, and yet we all know, for better or for worse, if there was once a spiritual connection between us, there is something that lingers.

It's for the better if what lingers is love, which God can hold, and mold and shape and give new life to.

It's for the worst, if it's stuff that needs to be resolved and healed and cleaned up a bit, before it's made new. The only sinful part, in all of this talk of rupture of relationship, is if we choose to stay there in that broken place, where anger, resentment, and fear reside, because we are offered so much more by the living Christ.

The clue in our text about why the kingdom belongs to children is in the word, "receive". Children naturally receive the awareness that they are dependent upon their source. Just think of a baby who reaches to his mother to be fed, or a toddler who runs to her father for protection, or a middle schooler who knows it's uncool to cuddle any longer, but delights when a parent sits on the bed and has a quiet conversation with them each night.

May we too, receive the truth that we are dependent upon the source who created us, redeemed us, and sustains us, so that we may live into the fullness of the relationships God desires for us.

Amen.