



All Saints Mission: October 4, 2015

Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

"While we teach our children about life, our children teach us what life is all about."

"Children are not things to be molded but people to be unfolded."

"There are no seven wonders in the eyes of a child. There are seven million."

These sentiments and more appear on a Pinterest page devoted to quotes about children. On this same page are the images different people have paired with these words—images of children's faces, small, furry animals, flowers and all manner of sweetness.

This morning you and I may recognize some of these very sentiments about children as notions that we hold dear because, after all, we ourselves were children once, some of us

have had children or grandchildren, and we all of us cannot help but be moved by the plight of children in today's world, whether that plight has to do with the residential schools and our First Nations children or whether that plight has to do with refugee children.

But what would be a mistake would be to take these notions and believe that the culture that Jesus lived in had any of these same notions.

At the end of Mark's Gospel for today we are once again listening to Jesus talk about children. This is the second time Mark's Jesus mentions children in the space of about twenty lines. The first time, he takes a child in his arms and tells the disciples that those who receive one of these will receive God. The second time, in today's reading, over the objections of his own disciples, he again takes a child in his arms and first tells them that the kingdom of God belongs to one such as this and then says: "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

And so how did people in Jesus' time view children? What might Jesus' actions and words about children mean in his context? And what might what Jesus' actions and words be saying to us today?

In the ancient Roman context that Jesus inhabited, family life was presided over by the eldest male member of the family who was known as the "paterfamilias." The paterfamilias had absolute power over the household. When it came to children, the paterfamilias ruled the roost, meaning that if a child angered him he could disown them, sell them into slavery and in some cases decide that they would be killed. Children in this culture were truly "the least of these," a way of having a household worker or an heir. Entirely absent in this understanding of children was any sense that children had an inherent worth or a perspective on life that could teach adults anything. Thus, in ancient households, it was children who were the most vulnerable to sickness, violence and neglect (half the children in ancient Rome died before the age of ten).

And so this morning we are not given the option of interpreting Jesus' words about children as commending an idealized view of childhood to us as a way of speaking about the kingdom of God. Rather, as one Biblical critic says, the key to the interpretation of these *Markan* passages on children lies in abandoning the notion of child as a symbol of some idealized human state and, instead, learning about children as people and what that their lives were really like in ancient times.

And so what we are asked to do is hard here, for it may mean that we have to let in what children in ancient times actually experienced, what some of us as children may have experienced and what children in our own times still experience. We do this not just to rehearse or relive such stories, but because these are the systemic things that Mark's Jesus is challenging so vehemently.

Philosopher and psychoanalyst Alice Miller describes what can happen to children in households in which domination and violence occur. First, children can be hurt or neglected without anyone knowing because they are the most helpless and dependent of people in a "household" (whether that household is an actual household or is a school is an entire nation). Second children are not allowed to react or to process the feelings that

understandably come with neglect or hurt. And then finally, children either repress the memory of what happened or end up enacting what was done to them in their own family situation onto others.

It is this cycle, a cycle that begins in households, that Jesus attempts to break open, insisting that God, our God, is not an angry, dominating father or mother, but is the one who has come to redefine households, societies and economies. This new redefinition he calls the realm of God, the kingdom of God: a challenging, counter-cultural realm which proposes both a family and a society that is about invitation, not neglect; peace, not violence, dignity and empowerment, not oppression. It is a realm that is good news for the powerless and the easily oppressed—for children, the poor, the sick and the outcast, and on this day, for animals, and the earth itself. And it is bad news for those accustomed to power.

The one who has come to establish this realm is Jesus—God incarnate who, himself, takes on the powerlessness of children in his own suffering and death, who himself stands with all of us when we were powerless as a child.

And so this morning, where are you being invited into the realm of God, a realm that says no to any family, organization, or culture that undermines the human dignity of others, that lords it over the weak and the helpless? Where are you being invited into a world and into specific actions that come from seeing the world's children, all of them, as our kin, as our relations, and from recognizing the God-given dignity of all of the poor, all of the helpless and all of the dispossessed?

Today of course is October the 4th, the traditional date for The Feast of St. Francis of Assisi—and so later this afternoon we will be hosting a pet blessing to honour him and to honour the creatures that he loved. At the heart of Franciscan spirituality is the very realm that Jesus came to inaugurate—a realm in which the most helpless and vulnerable—the poor, the animals and the earth itself—are befriended in the name of the crucified Christ. It is this kind of befriending that made him a saint of the Church. It is this kind of befriending that calls out to us, the baptized today.