

All God's Children (Mark 10.13-16)
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Our gospel reading this morning is actually part of a larger conversation. The tenth chapter of Mark's gospel opens with religious people who liked to antagonize Jesus questioning him about divorce. They were always trying to trip him up about something.

Jesus answers his critics by being for once stricter than the tradition called for. The tradition said that a man could leave his wife by formally divorcing her. Usually, when confronted with scripture texts and religious traditions, Jesus offered a progressive, liberal, inclusive view that challenged the legalistic applications of the tradition. But this time, Jesus' opinion seems even less flexible than the conservative view.

But really, Jesus is being consistent with his progressive, positive, and practical approach to spirituality. You see, the tradition says that a man could leave his wife...it didn't seem to work in reverse. In that patriarchal culture, women had very little status apart from a man. Women were known as someone's daughter, someone's wife, someone's mother.

Women weren't considered by men to have agency...and men had the power. So if a woman leaves the protection of her father's house to become someone's wife, and her husband leaves her...her options might be very limited in that time. If her father is no longer alive, and if she doesn't have an adult son or a brother willing to take her in, the woman could be left to face very hard times.

In his compassion and in his commitment to justice and fairness, Jesus is suggesting that divorce in his culture places women at an unfair disadvantage. Today...Jesus would probably tell women to get a career and men to pay child support. Jesus isn't condemning people to unhealthy and miserable and sometimes even unsafe relationships, nor is he holding up heterosexual marriage as the norm as some might suggest...he's trying to prevent people from being victimized by systems that favor men over women. He's actually challenging misogyny in his culture. He's pushing back against the tradition as he so often does, and he's doing it for the same reason he always does...because people matter more than the tradition. He's saying what he's always said...Do unto others as you have them do unto you.

Later in chapter 10 of Mark's gospel, a rich young man comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit divine life. Jesus says, "you know the commandments - don't murder or steal or defraud others"...in other words, treat others the way you'd want to be treated. And the rich young man says, "I know those commandments. And I keep them...I'm no murderer. I'm no thief. I'm not even dishonest." And Jesus says, "You lack one thing: Generosity. Sell your possessions and give to the poor...then you will have heavenly treasure." And Mark says the young man's face fell...because he had a lot of stuff.

Jesus didn't say, "worship me." He didn't even say, "Worship God the way I do" or "Call God the name I call God." He didn't say, "Be heterosexual" or "join one religion and avoid all the others." He said remember the commandments that call you to recognize the sacred value of others, and then put your money where your mouth is. Give to something beyond your own comfort. Be generous, because if you needed a hand, you'd hope there would be one there for you. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.

You know, I never complain about social programs. I want them administered efficiently, of course, but I hope my tax dollars are going to educate children and to provide income for retirees and to provide medical care for veterans and disaster relief when our neighbors are in need. I think a wealthy and powerful country should make sure its citizens are safe and well fed and educated and insured.

And I pledge to the church. Because I honestly believe that people need to hear they have sacred value...not that they can earn it or that if they jump through some hoops God will bestow it...but that just as they are, they are already persons of sacred value. I believe with all my heart that people need to know that they are persons of power and they can use their power wisely for their good and for the good of the world. I believe in churches that promote that kind of progressive, positive, and practical spirituality and I especially believe in this one because I think we are as committed to that message as any church ever has been. And I believe it is the message of Jesus. So I'm not ashamed to preach stewardship and I take great pleasure in practicing it.

Jesus' message to the rich young man was: Don't steal, don't hurt people, don't defame people, don't do anything that you wouldn't want someone to do to you...and that not withholding your generosity. Make generosity part of your spirituality. Supporting what you say you believe in with your time, talent, AND treasure is what Jesus told that young man would bring eternal significance to his life.

Sandwiched between those two stories is the passage we heard today. The kingdom of God is like the innocence, the wonder, the trust, the generosity of children. Children have to be taught to hate...because until they are taught to hate, they have no ill will toward anyone.

Children are forgiving. The little kid that was mean to them time and again can suddenly say, "let's be friends" and the child is delighted at the prospect.

Children hope beyond reason. No matter how many times the parent has said, "No, you can't stay up past 9", or "No, you can't watch that TV show", children will ask one more time...this might be the time someone says yes!

Children believe in magic. Santa and the generosity and kindness he represents make sense to children. There may really be gold at the end of a rainbow in the mind of a child. I really could grow up to be a doctor or a rock star or president or a truck driver who thinks life on the road is exciting and fun. Children really make a wish when they blow out the candles on their birthday cakes...because wishes sometimes come true. To a child, possibilities are endless...sounds like faith, doesn't it?

Children will play until you make them rest. Children will take risks that they have not yet learned to be afraid to take. Children really believe that a kiss will make their owie feel better, and they really believe that hugging you ought to make you feel better. Children are positive thinkers, and they are by nature progressive.

Children had less status in Jesus' culture than women did. They had no power. No rights. Even the disciples want them to be invisible. But Jesus makes time for the children. Not just because he was a good guy who was sweet to children.

If you needed services, you'd want them...so he tells the rich young man who can share his resources to do so.

And if you were a woman you wouldn't want to be left destitute just because your husband was tired of you. So men, don't do that to women.

And if you were a child, you wouldn't want people to act as if you weren't there, as if you didn't matter.

He's saying the same thing over and over in as many ways as he can...He's saying that all people have sacred value. All people deserve to be happy. All people have something to give to the world. All people matter.

In this chapter, he names three marginalized groups...women, the poor, and children...and one of those groups, the little children, can even teach us how to regain our personal power...the power of hope, the power of love, the power of joy, the power of expecting and allowing our Good to be made manifest in our experience.

And then Jesus makes a point of saying that those who society has forgotten or even that religion has said are secondary are not forgotten by God, are never secondary to God. There are no second class citizens in the kin-dom of God.

Jesus' message for us today is two-fold: (1) We are ALL God's Children, so let's treat all people as if we believed that were true, and (2) We are ALL God's Children, so let's reclaim the joy and the wonder that children have and that our divine Parent delights to see us express. This is the good news. Amen.

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**I am a child of God!
I deserve to be happy.
I am a child of God!
I deserve a good life.
I am a child of God!
I deserve to be loved.
And I am.
Amen.**

"I am Thy child, and as such I demand, without limitations, a divine [child's] share of Thine illimitable riches." Paramahansa Yogananda