

The Rev. Erin Hensley
October 7, 2018
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Mark 10:2-16

So Very Near You

Throughout Jesus' of Nazareth ministry in word and in deed, Jesus' proclaimed, "The Kingdom of God is very near you, change your mind, and trust the good news."

The kingdom is flesh and blood and low places and wide fields and a way through the fields. The kingdom is pain being ushered in to a seat at a fine table served with full of goodness and kindness. The kingdom of God lifts up the lowly, gives shade to the most vulnerable one, and welcomes outsiders into the very center of its life.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus welcomed the children to himself and said to his disciples it is to such as these children that the kingdom of God belongs.

First century dwellings were not private homes. They also served as places to work not just play and were hubs of the wider business world. Children played in their houses and were easily part of the manufacturing business that took place in homes. Yet they had no voice and no standing in and of themselves in the politics of the day. They were even lowlier than the status and agency of women.

Not in the kingdom of God begun and continued in Jesus. In God's kingdom, the lowliest of the low have dignity and are worthy of love and belonging. As Jesus welcomed the children, God embraced those who were powerless. God gave them direct access to Godself. God blessed the ones who the world dismissed and said to such as the lowly like these. They have the keys to the kingdom.

The same goes for women. In the passage appointed for today's Gospel reading there are two different Greek words, the original language of the New Testament, that are both translated as the word divorce. Please get out your bulletin, get a pen/pencil, and follow along in the Gospel reading:

"Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' Replace the word "divorce" here with the phrase "put away." This is a closer translation of the Greek word which referenced an actual practice in which women, sometimes men, but mostly women were literally sent away from the household and the wider community without legal rights and still in subjection to the original spouse.

So the Pharisees asked Jesus "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife?"

Jesus responded "What did Moses command you?" They replied with Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." Replace the word "divorce" here with the phrase "put away," the closer translation of the Greek word that referenced the practice of sending the women away without legal rights and still in subjection to the

original spouse. The “certificate of dismissal” to which Jesus referred is the written document that dissolved the marriage for both parties.

Jesus then quoted from Genesis and reminded the Pharisees of the intention of God of mutuality and partnership in marriage.

Then the disciples spoke to Jesus privately about the Pharisees question. Jesus responded to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” Once again the Greek word here is actually a reference to the practice of sending a spouse away with no legal rights and still in subjection to the original spouse. Jesus said this practice was tantamount to adultery.

Then, adults were bringing children to where they were so that Jesus might meet them and they might meet Jesus. The disciples didn’t want their time to be interrupted, so they interrupted themselves and gave them a talking to. Jesus then gave his disciples a talking to “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

Jesus redirected them to consider not what’s merely legal, but what’s right, what’s God’s intention. God’s intention is not that anyone man woman or child is to be put away, is to be without rights and in subjection to another. There are rights and there are responsibilities. In God’s kingdom there is not second-class citizenship or subjections or slavery. The lowly have been brought up to level ground. They have been welcomed into the very arms of God, the strongest tower of compassion, the widest branches of dignity.

Children are welcomed in this community. They are seen and heard and loved as they are. The St. Alban’s Shepherds, volunteer nursery workers, are kind to all and especially loving to those who are having the hardest time being away from parents. St. Alban’s Director of Family Ministries and Youth Minister plan nurturing faith opportunities with the children and youth’s best interest at heart, knowing each child and honoring their strengths and growing edges.

And children are welcome in this worship space and in the Assembly Room to sit with and be with adults. A cacophony of crying babies, trying toddlers, and excited elementary school students to me are signs of the kingdom of God. They are signs of a healthy, vital church family. And having parents have 30 minutes together sitting next to each other while the children are in the nursery or in Children’s Chapel, this is a sign of health, too!

Women are welcomed here, too. I’m privileged to be the second female rector in this congregation. Women and men have served faithfully as both senior and junior wardens. When women share with me that they have been hurt and perpetrated against, I believe them. The kingdom of God authentically listens and investigates pain for the sake of restoration, never for the sake of show.

And men here can have friends and share feelings without shame. They're not threatened to work side by side with women. They trust in the power of God working through people. They want the youth of St. Alban's to grow up trusting the Lord, keeping their faith, and respecting themselves and women as they become men.

Our wider Episcopal Church canons, by which I am thankfully bound as a priest says in Canon 19 "When marital unity is imperiled by dissension, it shall be the duty, if possible, of either or both parties, before taking legal action, to lay the matter before a Member of the Clergy; it shall be the duty of such Member of the Clergy to act first to protect and promote the physical and emotional safety of those involved and only then, if it be possible, to labor that the parties may be reconciled."

The dissolution of a marriage is something we grieve and at the same time, sometimes this is necessary. Not all marriages can be resurrected. And like Jesus said to the Pharisees violence, disempowerment was never the intention of marriage. Jesus said that women and men were equal partners in marriage.

God's kingdom continues here and now even and especially through St. Alban's. Whoever you are-man, woman, or child- take heart, don't give up, we can faithfully proclaim alongside Jesus "the Kingdom of God is very near you."