

Like a Child: Keeping Our Integrity

- Psalm 26 ...for I have walked in my integrity,
and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering.
- Job 2:1-10 The Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered
my servant Job?...He still persists in his integrity....”
- Hebrews 2:5-12 For this reason Jesus is not ashamed
to call them brothers and sisters
- Mark 10:2-16 “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive
the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

If you were reading the lectionary this week, you noticed that I did not read the whole of the gospel portion. This is not because I want to avoid dealing with Jesus’ strong words on divorce. Let me say just this: Jesus was not faced in this situation with persons who were going through the pain of a loveless and destructive marriage. or the pain of a divorce after sincere efforts have not succeeded. Divorce has touch all of us in some way. and the truly Christian response is compassion and healing, not moral badgering of those who have already suffered enough.

This is also a favorite text of those who oppose marriage having anything to do with gay or lesbian persons who want to commit themselves to relationships of love. Jesus is not addressing that issue. He is responding to the Pharisees who want Jesus to hang himself on his own words. They aren’t interested in deepening their understanding or becoming better spiritual leaders. They are out to trap him and to protect their power and control.

This passage is not really about marriage and divorce. It is about people of faith who have lost their integrity, their wholeness. “It was because of your hardness of heart that Moses wrote these laws allowing for divorce,” says Jesus. It was Moses’ accommodation to half-heartedness and the diminishing of integrity in faith. Mark purposefully places the story of Jesus and the children right after this encounter with the Pharisees. The disciples reprimand parents for bothering Jesus by bringing their children. Kids don’t belong here. This is adult stuff. Children don’t know anything yet. They don’t bring enough life experience or prestige or power. But Jesus upbraids the disciples. Let the children come. Get out of their way! God’s kingdom already belongs to them. Furthermore, unless you can receive the kingdom like a child, you cannot hope to enter it.

This can be understood two ways. The only way to receive the kingdom of God is with the openness and trust, imagination and whole-heartedness of young children. Or, unless we receive the kingdom of God as we would receive a little child, we can’t be part of it. Little children have no power, prestige, or influence

that can boost our egos or help us get ahead in the world. We don’t gain anything in terms of worldly status by hanging around little children. But if we do stay close to children and are open to who they are, then we will begin to discover the gateway to the kingdom of God. Why? Because the kingdom already belongs to little children and they know the way.

Early in the week, I planned to reflect only on this story of Jesus and the children. Yet my attention kept being drawn also to the psalm and the reading from Job. The word “integrity” stood out. The psalmist prays: “Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering.” The psalm may at first sound boastful and bargaining. “Look, God, I have been faithful and you owe me your protection.” But that is really not the message. The psalmist has held on to his faithfulness in the face of challenges and temptations. He has put his relationship with God above everything else but not without struggle. The word “integrity” means wholeness and unbrokenness. In terms of faith, integrity means a harmony between what we believe and how we live. The psalmist is saying that he has committed himself to live his faith in spite of everything going on around him. But it’s tough! He needs help.

In Job, God calls a meeting of the heavenly council. Satan is a member of this Divine Cabinet and has a particular role. His job is to go around testing people and their relationship with God. The biblical assumption is that we don’t grow in faith without challenges and testings. The figure of Satan has no more power than this, testing or tempting those who are trying to remain faithful to God, to live with integrity. “Have you considered my servant Job?” God asks Satan. “There is no one like him on earth, blameless, upright, fearing God and turning from evil.” Earlier God gave Satan permission to test Job’s integrity. Job held firm. So now God says, “See, even though I let you put the screws to him, Job has persisted in his integrity.” The story continues to unfold and Job experiences one disaster after another, each one more painful than the one before.

Job is the foremost biblical story about the challenge of keeping our integrity, holding on to our relationship of trust in God. Living by our faith is not easy. It doesn’t shield us from suffering. It doesn’t protect us from struggle or times of severe doubt. Our relationship with God is not a Teflon coating that deflects experiences that are painful, discouraging, or just part of this fragile human life that we all share. Sometimes it seems that taking on a life of faith just brings us into more suffering and struggle. The question is: In the midst of the enormous suffering that comes to Job, will he hang onto his love for and trust in God? Will he keep his integrity? Will he deepen his wisdom about what faith is?

Somehow the theme of integrity began connecting for me with what Jesus saw in the Pharisees and in the children. In the psalm and in Job, we human beings are affirmed as capable of keeping our integrity, our relationship with God. But it is a challenge. There are experiences in life that push us away from the childlike ability to be open and trusting, to be full of wonder and joy. I began to see more clearly what seems to be the basic view of human life in scripture, at least in Jesus. When we are young children, we are closest to God; the kingdom belongs to us. As we grow up in this world, influences and experiences have a way of eroding

that relationship. Curtis Harper was giving his spiritual report the other night to the Festival Center Mission Group. He spoke about this very thing, that when we are young children, we are very close to God. But as we grow up, we get “stiff armed” away from that closeness by a variety of influences and forces. Unfortunately, as we become adults who have been “stiff armed,” we become part of the “stiff arming” of children. Like the disciples, we get in their way.

Our spiritual work as adults is to find our way back to the childlikeness Jesus is talking about. It’s not about returning to our childhood. We can’t do that. And it isn’t becoming “childish,” a term I dislike because it slanders children. It is about the integrity of our faith, regaining a wholeness and completeness that comes from harmonizing our spirits and lives with God.

This view is at odds with what most of us were taught, that we are born sinners and have to be “made” good and right. A relationship with God has to be “put into” us. Children are blank slates upon which we must write something that turns them into responsible, moral, and spiritual beings. It is the “original sin” doctrine that has so ingrained itself in us. But the Bible actually makes the opposite assumption. Not original sin, but original blessing and goodness. The psalmist HAS been able to live with integrity, with faith, holding onto his relationship with God in the midst of great adversity. God lifts up Job as an exemplary human being, keeping on being faithful in the face of the greatest challenges. This is the childlikeness Jesus was talking about, treasuring our relationship with and love of God as the dearest, most central part of our lives, that which fulfills everything else. The Pharisees were not evil people. They had just lost their way, becoming obsessed with the trappings and structures instead of the heart of religion, the life of the spirit, of living out of their love God.

So, who is Jesus in all of this? Why is he so important? He is the one who points us to children who can lead us into the kingdom of God. In his teachings and life we can find our way back to integrity, to wholeness and completeness. The Letter to the Hebrews calls Jesus “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” We might say that Jesus is one who reveals to us what it means to be a true human being the way God made us. The reading for today says that Jesus was the pioneer of our salvation made perfect through suffering. “Perfect” here means fulfilled or complete. The same as integrity. Facing everything that we face as human beings, Jesus, as one of us, held onto his faithfulness, his integrity, through his sufferings. In this way, he is the pioneer of our salvation, our healing and wholeness. He has blazed the trail, as it were, for us to follow. And he has done so as our brother, as one who is kin to us. He is “not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters.” Jesus is not ashamed of us. He lived with such compassion for us so that we draw from him encouragement and power to live our lives fully as God’s beloved daughters and sons.

We do get “stiff armed” by experiences that can make us forget who we really are. We can drift or get pushed away from the original goodness that is ours, from the relationship with God that we already have but has been covered over. The work of the spiritual life, the life of following Jesus, is to touch anew our capacity to love and trust God, and to live our lives out of that relationship.

A friend sent me an article from the Christian Science Monitor. It was about the terrible killings that took place in Lancaster County, PA. “After Monday’s killings,” says the article, “the grandfather of one of the slain girls went to the home of [Charles Carl] Roberts’s father, consoling and hugging him, pouring forth a love and innocence of the kind remembered of the girls in the school...While Roberts is now gone, the Amish example of forgiveness is a reminder that real safety lies less in acting out of fear to prevent violence and more on qualities such as forgiveness that better connect people. Such compassion reduces fears and reaches those prone to violence.”

What we saw in the responses of the Amish community is what Jesus saw in children. Holding onto the integrity, the wholeness that comes from our relationship with God, in the midst of everything that would tear us away from it. Receiving the kingdom of God as a child means loving when it is easier to hate, forgiving when it is easier to retaliate, seeking compassion and deeper understanding when it is easier to judge others and label them as enemies. It also means being joyful and thankful even when it makes more “sense” to be despairing and discontent. The message of scripture is not that we are woeful, hopeless sinners, too messed up and broken to do anything for ourselves. The message is that we are made a “little lower than the angels, and crowned with glory and honor.” We are made with integrity so that our relationship with God need never be completely lost. It isn’t easy. We need help from God, from Jesus, from each other. But it is possible because that is who we really are.