

COUNTER-CULTURAL COMPASSION

Today's Gospel reading appears to be two totally unrelated stories.

- I used to think this was done so that preachers had an option to avoid the delicate issue of divorce and instead talk about kids.
- But a closer look may reveal a connection between these two texts.
 - Both stories tell us about JESUS' concern for outcasts and the less fortunate in society,
 - and how HE expects us to treat them.

In JESUS' time, children and women were on the lower levels of society.

- As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, children were considered useless until they were old enough to help out; they were third class at best.
 - Women were seen as nothing more than property.
 - Wives could be the victims of divorce for reasons as trivial as burning dinner, not keeping up the house, or just getting older. –
 - These were loopholes for men who wanted out or to go elsewhere.
 - And, if she didn't have another male relative to support her, a father, brother, or son, she ended up as a beggar or prostitute.
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GOD intends marriage to be a union, a partnership, supportive and interdependent, but GOD also knows our faults.

- GOD gave us a high standard to aim for, but GOD wants most of all for us to flourish,
 - and in some marriages that can't happen.

GOD knows that in some cases, divorce is inevitable, especially when physical, mental, or emotional abuse is involved.

- That's why Moses allowed divorce but made it difficult.
 - A written divorce document was required and since most people couldn't read or write, the process took time:
 - time enough to rethink what you were doing and hopefully work out your differences, saving the marriage.

Divorce is painful.

- It hurts not only those directly involved but others, too.
 - Siblings and parents suffer.
 - Friends sometimes have to choose sides.
 - The people who hurt the most, though, are the children.
 - They are often caught in the middle of the proceedings and disagreements.
 - They are often the most vulnerable in a divorce.
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The Gospel of Mark is the gospel of mercy.

- It is no surprise that in Mark, JESUS' teaching about divorce is followed by HIS calling of the little children.
- When the Pharisees confronted JESUS on the issue of divorce, HE considered the needs of both women and children, again, the lesser in society.
 - It's interesting that JESUS spoke both of a husband divorcing his wife *and* a wife divorcing her husbands because according to Jewish law, only the husband could divorce his wife.
 - JESUS was attributing to women the equal right to divorce their husbands, even though such right didn't exist.
 - And that would have really upset the Pharisees.

As we've been hearing, JESUS has been doing a lot that set them off,

- violating much of what brought order to the Pharisee's world.
 - JESUS had fed a crowd, not just the ones who were deserving of special attention by the Pharisee's definition;
 - healing those whose afflictions were generally attributed to sin;
 - challenging traditions about the Sabbath;
 - praising those who were not among the chosen, like the Syrophenician woman who showed great faith.
- Today, JESUS takes up their challenge, inferring as HE has so many other times that the law is a means to an end and not an end in and of itself.

And JESUS reinforces this compassion and mercy for women by then welcoming the children,

- embracing them with the exact very same compassion and making it so very simple:
 - JESUS loves the little children.
All the little children of the world,
Red and yellow, black and white,
They are precious in HIS sight.
JESUS loves the little children of the world.

But, as I said before, this second story isn't separate from the first.

- They are connected to what JESUS teaches about GOD's love for all people.

Did you notice who brought the children to JESUS?

- We usually think it was their mothers and it could have been.
 - But the text doesn't say that.
 - It says, "People were bringing little children."
 - Not mothers, but people.

But who are these people?

- Mothers, most likely yes, but also perhaps mothers whose husbands have divorced them.
- And fathers.
- Parents. But single parents, too.
- Extended family, neighbors, and others.
 - We aren't told who, specifically, but they are doing the same thing:
 - bringing children, the lesser in society, to be touched by JESUS.

Most often, when someone wants to be touched by JESUS, it is to be healed.

- Children are no exception.
- In fact, other than when JESUS places a child amid the "make-me-first, JESUS" disciples, we only hear about children in their need to be made well.
 - Jairus' daughter who dies, only to be restored to life by JESUS.
 - A boy possessed by an impure spirit that the disciples failed to heal.
 - The Syrophenician woman's daughter, also possessed by a demon.
- In this society, children are vulnerable but only brought to our attention when needing to be cared for.

Is it the same with the children in the story today?

- Are they sickly, needing to be touched?

- Perhaps that explains the disciples' efforts to stop them and protect JESUS from disease or demons.
 - Yet, JESUS is indignant, instructing that these "people"—parents, single parents, women, divorced women, grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends and neighbors—be allowed to bring their children to HIM,
 - so that he can touch, heal, and bless them.
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Perhaps this is the link between the two stories.

- Both elevate GOD's compassion for those treated unfairly and criticize those whose hard-heartedness results in treatment and attitude that hurt others.
 - If the disciples had listened when JESUS' placed a child in their midst and spoke of welcoming these little ones, their reaction would have been different,
 - more hospitable and welcoming, especially to those perceived as having less or no value.
 - It is to the suffering, dependent, and vulnerable that the Kingdom of GOD belongs.

This last assertion would have shocked the community listening to JESUS:

- the people bringing children, HIS disciples, and most of all the Pharisees.
- It likely should shock many of those listening to JESUS today.

Law is important.

- Marriage is important.
 - Divorce represents a tearing asunder something GOD has blessed.
 - Everyone who has been divorced, or is part of a family of divorce, or close to someone who has been divorced knows this.
 - So, it's not exactly news.
 - What is news—indeed, the good news—is that in this passage, GOD shows compassion to precisely those who have been sundered and torn apart, those who are alone, dependent, vulnerable, suffering, disenfranchised, and hurting.
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All of us are hurting in one way or another.

- All of us are in need of healing and blessing.
- And the only way we can be free of our hurt is to come to JESUS.

To know the abundant life JESUS offers means letting go of control.

- It means coming, even when we don't feel deserving.
 - It means letting ourselves be brought to the ONE who offers what no other does.
- The abundant life JESUS offers is not something earned or deserved.
 - It is a gift from GOD, given not just to those who meet specific standards or cultural expectations.
 - It is available to all who, in humbling themselves before GOD, begin to see others as no better or worse.
 - Contrary to what society and culture tell us, all are equal in GOD's eyes, dearly loved, always forgiven,
 - and welcomed into the arms of the ONE who extends grace, help, support, understanding, and love for those down and out, who feel unimportant, rejected, and undeserving.
 - The unconditional love of GOD is for everyone, including those who culture is prone to leave behind, those without power, and those who are easy to miss or dismiss.
 - It is to such as these that the Kingdom of GOD belongs.
 - And only when we recognize our own dependence and vulnerability can we truly receive the counter-cultural comfort of JESUS, which is available to all.