

## **Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost October 6 2024**

### **Genesis 2:18-24; Mark 10:2-16**

How do we read scripture?

I'm teaching my class for UD right now and we start with learning about the Bible and how this library of books has been read from our Jewish siblings, through the first followers of Jesus, up to today.

Even Jesus acknowledges that there is some kind of distance between the text and our understanding of what it means. Asking the lawyer who wonders what he must do to inherit eternal life, "What is written in the law and how do you read it?" (Luke 10:25-26).

As my class has had conversation, we have struggled with how one reads scripture in a way that is faithful. One thing we have found is that Christians from the beginning have read and understood scripture in community. They have discerned together, and prayerfully, what scripture has to say about how they are to live in today's world.

Why is it important to read scripture in community?

That brings us to the gospel reading from Mark. I believe that what Jesus and the Pharisees are talking about is not what to believe about divorce, but how to read scripture in a way that informs our daily living, and part of that is about being careful we are not reading scripture in a way that benefits us or lets us off the hook.

The Pharisees are trying to get Jesus into trouble. They ask him an already settled question about divorce, hoping he will speak to it in a way that will get King Herod mad at him and perhaps have Jesus killed in the same way that question of divorce got John the Baptist killed. Go back to chapter 6 in Mark for details.

Jesus, upon hearing the question asks them, what did Moses tell you about this? He allowed men to write a certificate of dismissal and divorce her.

You know why, Jesus asks, because your hearts are sclerotic, dried out. He, and you, read scripture in a way that benefits something you want to do anyway. Something that ruptures the relationship between one human being and another. Something that treats that other human being, who happens to be female, as a disposable item.

Jesus than points them back to the beginning of the Bible. Genesis. The creation of Adam and Eve. God's first intent for us.

And Jesus states the grounding principle of our lives. It is not good for human beings to be alone. We have an inherent need to be in community. We need each other. Just look at Western North Carolina, or around here after the Derecho to see the truth of that. Rugged individualism plays well on screen, but doesn't last long in real life.

Humans are called into loving, mutually supportive, respectful, caring relationships with one another. This means that we prioritize those relationships and work to keep them that way. To repair ruptures. To reconcile when there are arguments. It means listen to understand and communicate clearly. It means

we confess when we are wrong and forgive when another wrongs us. To strive to preserve that relationship.

Jesus argues that God's creational desire for integrity in our relationships remains. While Moses might have made allowances in some cases, this does not nullify God's original intent.

Where are there other places where we might interpret scripture in such a way that it benefits us or lets us off the hook?

I was listening to a podcast from *Christianity Today* just after the Iranian missile barrage on Israel. The guest was making a clear case- from a Christian perspective- justifying Israel's actions in the last twelve months. From the awful and inhumane attack of Hamas on October 7 through the invasion of Lebanon. Stating at one point, "There is such a thing as Just War."

Listening to that, something did not sit right. Then I heard our text again and thought. That's what it is. Just war? Yes, it may be lawful. Augustine may have interpreted scripture that way- just like Moses did about divorce. But he did it because of our sclerotic human hearts. To justify and perhaps curb our already sinfully violent natures.

In other words, yes, Just War may be lawful, but not in the same way as love your neighbor is lawful. Not in the same way love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you is lawful.

What I longed for on this blatantly Christian podcast was for it to lead with the clear command of Jesus- love one another. And then move on to struggle

together- in community- with how we best live that out in this case. It moved too quickly to acceptance of war, violence, and death.

But the history of humans since that first rupture of relationship with God in Genesis is one that seeks to separate us from one another. To place us in boxes, tribes, peoples, nations. To turn wonderfully created and gifted by God fellow human beings into THEM.

You see the disciples doing that right after Jesus' debate with the Pharisees. They are preventing the children brought so that Jesus might lay his hands on them from coming to Jesus. We talked about this last week, that children in that culture were viewed as having little to no worth in society. They were nonentities with even fewer rights than women. Certainly, they shouldn't be taking up Jesus precious time when there were so many more worthy people seeking his attention.

Seeing this, Jesus clearly states God's take on that matter. He gets angry, incensed! Don't prevent these children from coming to me. It's to folks just like these you call undeserving, unworthy that the reign of God will belong. There will be all kinds of folks there.

And then we have this wonderful image of Jesus catching them up in his arms, placing his hands on them and blessing them.

I asked the group on Wednesday what image was in their head on hearing this and they said- it's the teacher on the playground in kindergarten. But what if it wasn't. The children are being brought so that Jesus might lay his hands on them. This language in Mark is always associated with healing. What if the image isn't

that of Jesus catching up these squealing, smiling, laughing children. But something more akin to a pediatrician's waiting room, or a children's hospital ward.

**Erlander Picture-** Either way, we have then the image of Jesus, the heart of God that is not shriveled and dry but so expansive and full that it is open to everyone. That does not cut off with a written note, or strike down with gun, bomb, or missile, but spreads his arms wide.

Wide both to die on the cross. And to catch us up in his arms. To lay his hands upon us sick, desperate, sinful children and bless us. Heal us. Love and accept us back into life and wholeness.

We read scripture in community because it is only in community that we can check ourselves. Am I reading this right, or do I have a blind spot here? Am I giving myself an answer that lets me off the hook?

Augustine's guideline for reading scripture was that if you read it in a way that did not lead to love of God and love of neighbor, perhaps you were doing it wrong.

I think that's a fine guideline.

Because isn't that what Jesus- God's clearest message to us about who God is and what God requires- calls us to?

And isn't that the promise that Jesus shows us here.

That if we are sick, sinful, broken, imperfect, God in Jesus will greet us with arms open wide and heart full of love to welcome us and to make us whole again.

That when people try and keep us away, God's love will always find a way to come through.

That the reign of God is not an exclusive place for the righteous, the rich, the perfect. But a community of human beings created in the image of God who recognize that they all are broken, sinful, imperfect, and continually in need of the boundless love of God come to us in Jesus.

Friends. We've spent months sitting at the feet of Jesus and pondering – together- what the reign of God looks like. And the reality is, it looks like us. Regular, ordinary, broken, sinful, imperfect, messy people who know that in Jesus we can be made whole. In the waters of baptism, we can be washed clean. In this community, we can find meaning and purpose. In the Meal, we can find forgiveness, be made whole, and strengthened to go into the world and proclaim with confidence, "I have found a place where everyone is welcome. Where God will greet you at the door with arms flung wide and a smile on God's face and say, I've been waiting for you."

It is not good that humans should be alone. Thanks be to God, we aren't.