Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

October 7, 2018

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FAMILY VALUES Genesis 2:18–24

Psalm 8

Mark 10:2–16

This is Worldwide Communion Sunday, and we think of the expanse of the Christian faith, and how the Christian Church is to be found in every nation and culture in every part of the globe. On Worldwide Communion Sunday, we become aware that there are Christians in places we do not ordinarily think of—places like Iran and Iraq and China. In so many nations, the witness of the Christian community is bold and filled with risk, and we celebrate all of that today.

But when we turn to the lectionary readings for this Sunday, our attention is drawn to something seemingly small in comparison. Our scripture readings have to do with life within the family unit. At the end of the sermon, I will bring us back to the worldwide church, but for the moment let’s try to delve underneath the scriptures that are assigned for this day, the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost.

I suppose the point I would like to make this morning is that we would do well to pay attention to the way in which the ministry and teachings of Jesus overturned the social world of his day, for if we fail to do so we will miss out on the impact the Gospel had upon the social structures or his day, and by implication we will fail to understand the importance of the Gospel for our own day and time. The focus of the Gospel reading from Mark is on the family, namely, the role of women and children within the family unit. The teachings of Jesus on this subject are radical and revolutionary.

Let’s see what we can discover. The subject of the first part of the reading is divorce. In an effort to test him, the Pharisees ask him whether or not divorce is legal. Jesus replies that the Mosaic law made provision for a man to divorce his wife by presenting her with a certificate, but this law was made because the hearts of men were hard and unbending. Jesus rejects this Mosaic law found in Deuteronomy in favor of the passage from Genesis we heard this morning, that a man shall leave his parents and be joined with his wife and that the two shall become one flesh. What God has joined together must not be separated.

Yet, divorce has been and always will be a shattering reality for all concerned. That I know all too well. Later, when Jesus speaks to his disciples in the privacy of a home, Jesus says that if a man divorces his wife and then marries another, he commits adultery. That’s pretty harsh to our ears, but Jesus may have pushed the envelope as a way to say that the marriage commitment that a husband and wife make in the first place is a sacred trust. Be that as it may, Jesus then adds something astounding. “If she divorces her husband and marries another, she too commits adultery.” Jesus here acknowledges that it is not only a man who may divorce his wife. A woman can also divorce her husband. Such a provision represents a radical shift in the accepted social practice of Jesus’s day. Jesus puts a woman on an equal footing with her husband! Unbelievable. We, of course, do not feel the impact of such a provision, for it has become commonplace in our social life that a woman can divorce her husband. In Jesus’s day such a teaching was revolutionary.

Now let’s turn to the children. The story is familiar. People were bringing children to Jesus so that he mnight touch them, but his disciples tried to put a stop to it. Why? In Jesus’s day, children had no value. They had no rights. They were at the bottom of the social heap. Girl babies couls be discarded at wqill, Jesus rebukes his disciples. Not only does he take them into his arms, he also says that adults must become as children if they are to enter the Kingdom of God. By his teaching and his action, Jesus overturns accepted social practice. He upsets the apple cart.

We tend to respond to this story of Jesus and the children in a sentimental fashion. How lovely, we say. How wonderful that Jesus received the children. We turn our thoughts to the innocence and purity of children, and forget that children can be all too human. This allows us to underappreciate the radical nature of Jesus’s behavior. His action was revolutionary. He knew that children were easily dominated and treated harshly by their parents. Some things never change. Children are still subject to unbelievable cruelty that is all too often waged against them, and not only by their parents. Think of our President’s decision to separate children from their immigrant parents who are seeking asylum. Within the home, they are often beaten into submission. Instances of extreme child abuse make it into the paper, but social workers tell us that these reports of abuse represent only a small fraction of the children who suffer at the hands of adults. The psychologist Alice Miller has documented how children who are abused are filled with anger and resentment, which they cannot express when they are children, but which they often do express when they become adults. This is why children who are abused often become adults who abuse. We would do well to pay attention to the way in which Jesus honored children, taking them into his arms.

Bottom line. Jesus took a stand against domination. He did not tolerate the way men dominated women in his day, or the way adults dominated children. Nor can we. That is why so many of us are incensed over the way white men in authority have demeaned and belittled the testimony of Dr. Blasey Ford. Jesus would not approve. Let us acknowledge that the Gospel as Jesus lived it and taught it had social implications that went far beyond the private and personal. When we keep the Gospel to ourselves and view it as something that relates only to our personal lives, we miss the truth. The Gospel can be a humanizing force in the world, which we would do well to take to heart. But The Gospel can be a humanizing force in our world

only if we who are followers of Jesus take the risk of living it and proclaiming it.

The good news is that the spirit of the Gospel has captured so many people in so many nations and cultures. This is what we celebrate today on this World Communion Sunday. The Gospel can be a force for good in the world. As once it had the power to elevate the social position of women and children, so it has the power to humanize life today.

The thing we must remember is that the ministry and teaching of Jesus introduced something and completely new into the social fabric of his time. He carried out his ministry not on the basis of what was considered as traditional and acceptable social behavior, but on the basis of the radical love of God. God’s love require that each and every human being, whether they be rich or poor, man or woman, young or old, child or adult, be conferred a dignity and a worth that must be upheld by all, and that to do anything less is a travesty of the truth of God’s Kingdom. This is, I believe, what has inspired human beings in all parts of the world to be captured by the Gospel as lived and taught by Jesus.

As for us, may we too continue to be captured and inspired by the Gospel we profess. So will we add our voices to the voices of our brothers and sisters everywhere and proclaim that we are followers of Christ, and that we will work tirelessly for a world in which God will be pleased to dwell. So be it. Amen .