Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

World Communion Sunday

October 3, 2021

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FAMILY VALUES Genesis 2:18–24

Mark 10:2–16

This is World Communion Sunday, and we think of the expanse of the Christian faith, and how the Christian Church has taken root in every nation and culture throughout the world. On World 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 Nineteenth 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 of 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 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 that 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 to 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 reality. That we 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. And then he adds something astounding. He says, “If she divorces her husband and marries another, she 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. But in Jesus’s day such a teaching was revolutionary. Think though, of Jesus’s teaching that if a divorced man re-marries he is committing adultery against his first wife, and that the same holds true for a woman who divorces her husband. That sounds revolutionary even to us, and surely makes many feel uneasy.

Be that as it may, let’s now turn to the children. The story is familiar. People were bringing children to Jesus so that he might touch them, but his disciples tried to put a stop to it. Why? Well, in Jesus’s day, children had no value. They had no rights. They were at the bottom of the social ladder. Girl babies especially could be discarded at will. 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. At the same time, we fail to appreciate the radical nature of Jesus’ behavior. In Jesus’s presence, children are valued beyond compare. That was revolutionary. We say, “how sweet,” but let us think of children in our society. They are still subject to unbelievable cruelty that is all too often waged against them. They have no power, especially within the confines of a family home. They can be beaten into submission. Instances of 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. We also know that 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. 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. For his behavior and his teaching have much to say to the way children are treated unjustly in our own day.

We need to make the connections. Jesus was a social prophet in his day, and it is not wrong for us to imagine how he would respond to the way social outcasts are treated in our day.

Let us acknowledge that the Gospel as Jesus lived it and taught it had social implications that went far beyond the private and the 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.

Perhaps that is why 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. There is something about the Gospel that cannot be denied. It not only has implications for our own personal lives, but it has implications for societies throughout the world. 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.

Social conservatives often say that we should not change our time-honored values when it comes to the family. But Jesus was not a social conservative. He was a social radical. His ministry and his teachings did not uphold traditional values but introduced something completely new into the social fabric of his time. He carried out his ministry not on the basis of what was considered as acceptable social behavior, but on the basis of the love of God. God’s love requires that each and every human being, whether they be rich or poor, man or woman, young or old, be conferred a dignity and a worth that must be upheld by all, and that to do anything less is a travesty against 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. May it be so. Amen.