

Soften Our Hearts, Lord

Sometimes, I have a certain sympathy for political campaign staffers. No matter how loyal you are, there are moments when you can't help but wish that the boss hadn't blurted out an especially worrisome soundbite... for example, Jesus's comments on the subject of divorce. Don't get me wrong – I'm no fan of divorce. It's heartbreaking when the dream of lifelong love dies, and it can be particularly tragic when kids are involved. But divorce is sometimes the only alternative when a marriage becomes unbearable. Those of us who have suffered through divorce ourselves or watched someone we love suffer through it don't need to have our pain compounded with accusations of adultery if we dare to love again. Jesus's words here are among his hardest teachings, and we shouldn't sugarcoat them. But before we give in to guilt or despair around divorce, let's put this passage in context, starting with our reading from the Book of Job.

Bible historians agree that Job is the oldest text in the Bible, written thousands of years before the Gospels. This tale of a faithful and prosperous man brought low through no fault of his own wrestles with one of the most troubling mysteries of the human condition: why do bad things happen to good people? Our story begins with a debate between Adonai and the Adversary, who has been slithering around the earth stirring up trouble. When Adonai praises Job's righteousness, the reptile sneers that Job's virtue will vanish the instant he's deprived of divine favor. Adonai allows the Adversary to take everything Job has, his children, his riches, and his health, confident that his faithful servant will remain steadfast. Even when taunted by his exasperated wife, Job refuses to blame God for his misfortunes. There's more here to explore but, for now, let's just bear in mind that Job suffered mightily and deserved none of it.

With that, let's return to Mark's Gospel. A few chapters back, King Herod executed John the Baptist for publicly criticizing his marriage to his brother's ex-wife, Herodias. Their marriage

would have been fine if Herodias had been widowed, so she must have been divorced when they tied the knot. The Pharisees knew how Herod dealt with one unruly prophet who dared to challenge his marriage. So, when they asked Jesus that seemingly innocuous question about divorce, perhaps they hoped he would say something that would send Herod into another murderous rage. Jesus was too savvy for that. Instead, he called out the hardness of heart that causes divorce. Only husbands could initiate divorce at that time, and there was significant disagreement about when they should. Some spiritual leaders thought divorce was only justified by adultery, but others argued for a man's absolute right to divorce his wife no matter how small her fault. Regardless of the justification, a rejected wife was typically thrust into a perilous life. As Jesus told the Pharisees, any man who divorced his wife on a whim was hard-hearted indeed.

Jesus's subsequent comments to the disciples are troubling. He seems less offended by divorce than by remarriage, which he calls adulterous. Bible scholars look for ways to soften his comments, but none of their arguments are entirely persuasive. Maybe Jesus really thought divorce was spiritually indefensible, making remarriage inherently adulterous, but I wonder. Tradition tells us that Mark's Gospel was written by Peter's secretary, and Peter sometimes missed the nuances in Jesus's teachings. Given that only men could initiate divorces, perhaps Jesus was primarily criticizing husbands who dumped their wives to marry younger, more beautiful women. That would certainly be hard-hearted, as would racing into a new marriage without fully acknowledging and grieving the serious loss that divorce entails. Still, I may be interpreting Jesus's comments too narrowly. I'll have to ask him about it when he gets back.

Meanwhile, Jesus's remarks about divorce set the stage for what he says about children and the Kingdom of God. Jesus often talks about what it takes to get into the Kingdom. Some of his comments conjure up images of St. Peter playing bouncer at the Pearly Gates: "sorry, friend,

you had an affair, a drinking problem, a Maserati convertible, and you played golf on Sunday mornings instead of going to church. The boss says I can't let you in." But Jesus says something important here. He tells the disciples to let the little children come to him because "it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Jesus says similar things elsewhere in the Gospels, and preachers have used his words to insist that anyone who wants to get past St. Peter had better be thoroughly humble and more chaste than the average 21st century adult could ever hope to be. But then Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." That idea of *receiving* the Kingdom as a little child introduces a whole new element to the conversation.

The Greek word Jesus uses here is *dechomai* (δέχομαι). It means "to receive," but in a welcoming way, gladly accepting what's given. Too many adults have come to believe, based on hard experience, that everything good comes with a catch. There's always a reason to look a gift horse in the mouth. But kids? Until they're taught to curb their enthusiasm, kids are experts in the art of receiving. They happily get wet and dirty – they don't worry about their clothes or how their hair looks in pictures. They're smart enough to prefer ice cream to kale, and they eat it without worrying if it runs down their chins. They unselfconsciously sing, dance, and paint without a single protest that they're really "not very good." Little children don't know how to be hard-hearted. They just adore puppies and kittens and ponies and rainbows and mud puddles and all of the messy, unsophisticated delights that the Father built into this glorious world. And that joyful, uncomplicated acceptance of good things is, I believe, what Jesus means when he talks about receiving the kingdom of God like a little child.

We can see in Job's wife the hard-heartedness that comes from misfortune. She lost her children and her wealth along with Job, so she has a right to be bitter. Job does better, but you

can hear the effort behind his words: “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” Stalwart, but strained. Perhaps a better example of receiving the Kingdom as a little child is Francis of Assisi, the saint whose feast we celebrate by blessing the animals.

Francis walked away from his family’s riches to live a life of extraordinary, joyful simplicity. He owned nothing but the clothes on his back, desired nothing but the love of God. He’s known for his compassion, for founding the Franciscan order of monks, for writing some exquisite prayers, and for engaging with nature as enthusiastically as a little child would. He regularly chatted up the birds and persuaded a ravaging wolf to become a beloved community pet without worrying for one second that anyone might think he was childish or naive. Today, Francis is the patron saint of animals and ecology and the international poster boy for the environmental movement.

This year’s Season of Creation is drawing to a close, but our task remains to hope and act with Creation even as we look forward to Advent, Christmas, and the year to come. Those of us who grieve over the damage humanity has done to the Earth have reason to be angry. It can be satisfying to point fingers at the people who continue to pillage the planet in the name of short-term profit. But those people are beloved children of God just as we are, even if they don’t act that way, and demonizing them is what the serpent does. The work of healing Creation is Kingdom work, which means it’s grounded in love. The Holy Spirit is working beside us, and we’ll do our part better if we resist the temptation to let challenges harden our hearts. It’s more difficult to live with soft hearts, because we feel everything and some of it really hurts. If we are to receive the Kingdom as little children, though, and apparently that’s the only way to get in, we need to be as softhearted as little children are. So, as we help the Holy Spirit heal Creation, we need to keep our hearts open, embracing every beautiful thing that remains in the world. Soften our hearts, Lord, we pray, and help us, as you did Francis, to fulfill your sacred task. Amen.