

19th Sunday of Pentecost

Sermon 10.4.15

Scripture: Genesis 2:18-24

Mark 10:2-16

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt Jennifer's finger fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

~Adrienne Rich

“Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”

Our Monday morning group is reading a book together. It’s called *Memories of God* and it’s by Roberta Bondi, a now retired professor of church history. It was Luise who brought her to our attention—Luise who’s newly coming to worship here but who had to be away this weekend. Roberta Bondi was Luise’s professor and mentor when Luise was a student at Candler School of Theology at Emory University.

A spiritual memoir, this book recounts many early and some painful experiences in Ms. Bondi’s life. Many of those were about being a girl. To be a girl when Ms. Bondi was young, as far as she could tell, was to be a faulty boy. There was an assumption then that girls are *almost* what boys are *truly* and easily and naturally.

Academia only propagated this early notion. In Ms. Bondi’s later experience, as a young adult, and a college and then graduate student, to be a female student was to be a flawed version of what a male student could be and usually was. It was to be subjective when the goal was to be objective. It was to be emotional when the goal was to be reasonable. It was to be curious when the goal was to be clear in seeking the unchanging and unassailable truth of things.

It’s an absurd notion. That human reason could mean anything without human emotion; that clarity of thought could be born of anything but curiosity about what mystifies and that it could then land anyone anywhere but amidst further curiosity; that objectivity could serve any good

purpose without a sense of one's own subjectivity: these are binaries that are silly and sometimes dangerous. And that they have much at all to do with gender and sex is to set upon human being something so limiting as to be paralyzing of both boys and girls, to say nothing of the people who claim the ground between these groups.

As you can tell, I never felt being a girl was equal to being disappointing. But that's not to say that I don't believe Bondi's experience as true and as also once pervasive. Really, I have no doubt that this was a notion that hung heavy over certain pockets of our culture and amidst certain generations and maybe beyond that. Maybe such commonplace misogyny was confined not only to the hyper-normative time of the post-Enlightenment, late modern era in the Western world—which is to say American in the 50s. No, maybe it reaches deep into human history and broadly across human cultures. Maybe we even have the second chapter of Genesis to hold responsible for it, or at least to testify to how far back in time this absurd notion yet held sway.

It's tough not to see in this reading an assertion of male chauvinism, male supremacy. Men were here first. Women are derivative of men, second-class spinoffs like *Joanie Loves Chachi* was to *Happy Days*. Woman was even named by Man, which is an infantilization of my gender that I simply can't take. No surprise, then, that I've never preached on this text, never had it read aloud during worship.

As to why the story seems undoubtedly to assert this, who can say? Of this I'm convinced: it's not because it happened this way. This isn't a reported account of an historic event. Rather, this is a narrative account of something someone among some people observed as true as regards women, men, and the other creatures of God's making.

The points, it seems to me, that abide are that people are social creatures and, as satisfying as the company of other creatures are, they aren't satisfying enough as company for most people. Most people need other people. Most people need a human partner with whom to journey through life, and for some not finding it is a source of anguish.

What's more, for some people, finding and holding close their partner is a process of deepening identification to the degree that it's strange, it's surprising. It points to some mystery. How could another person seem so very much a part of myself?

Finally, and perhaps most basically, this is a story about human sexuality, and the interpenetration that two people can experience together. This was once only imaginable as happening between a man and a woman. That our imagining has broadened to include homosexuality along with heterosexuality is good news to me. Above all, I think people tend to need

partners, and societies in which partnerships are established and stable, regardless of who those partners are, become societies that are established and stable and thus allow for human thriving.

As for the gendered aspect of it, perhaps the purported derivation of Woman from Man, and thus of women from men, points to the assumed need of men to protect women. Women on the whole run slower than men and are physically weaker, which is to say we're easier in general to prey upon than men. This, of course, is especially consequential in "primitive" societies—societies without established law, policing forces, and reliable punitive measures.

Just ask Sheela. She can attest to this, indeed recently did attest to this—in New York at a sort of spoken word festival. She has a piece that she performs about being a young woman in the Peace Corps settled in Papua New Guinea where she was nearly raped one night, and indeed likely would have been were it not for a man, with a machete, who rescued her. Sheela, as you may know, doesn't present as someone who needs or particularly wants rescuing, but of that night, long ago and far away, I thank God that she was rescued and I know she does, too. (Now she's gone on to win a couple prizes for this story, and will go further to perform it at the Moth Grand Slam later this year. Stay tuned.)

So, there's all this. But there's more. Women get pregnant and are then even less able to fend for ourselves if the going gets rough, though the wellbeing of the species depends upon our wellbeing especially during pregnancy and childbirth.

Really, all of this and more might have converged to be felt among those of the Ancient Near East (whence this story comes) as an assumption that women are to be gathered into a male paradigm and therefore are felt as, and can be understood as, derivative of men.

Okay. I have a problem with this—not least because I suspect the impulse to protect grows from the same seed as the impulse to prey upon. But I can also accept it—accept is as well-intended, especially given what Jesus does with this story.

He refers to it in the encounter that we just read about—an encounter between Jesus and some Pharisees who came to him to test him. Jesus interprets this ancient story, but in such a way that opens it up, broadens it, while also turning the social world as the Pharisees likely knew it inside out.

It's easy to hear the hard parts of this encounter—the hard lines, the harsh words that Jesus speaks. It's easy to hear these and, if you've been divorced, to feel condemned.

Let's see if we can hear past them.

The encounter happens at all because “some Pharisees” had come to Jesus to test him. Notice that they weren’t actually interested in Jesus’ thoughts on divorce. They weren’t actually curious about what this odd and out-of-the norm teacher, yet one who was gaining in renown and who apparently spoke with authority, had to say about a social phenomenon that was perhaps problematic—divorce.

“What should we do about this, which is causing pain and serious setback in the lives of so many people?” is not what those Pharisees were wondering. “What should we do about this growing trend that is wearing away the social fabric that contributes to human thriving?” is not what those Pharisees were hoping better to understand. “Let’s talk about the painful and persistent reality of divorce.” No, what these few Pharisees were up to isn’t actual enlightenment about an trying personal and social problem. What they were doing is akin to the “gotcha” approach that we see so much of these days, too much of these days.

Wikipedia usefully explains the intent of such a “gotcha” approach in the context of journalism: “The intent...is always premeditated and used to defame or discredit the interviewees by portraying them as self-contradictory, malevolent, unqualified, or immoral.”

It seems to me this is what these few Pharisee were up to when they approached Jesus. He was a libertine, they likely figured, working on the Sabbath as he frequently did, keeping company with people who were ritually unclean. And he was using this apparent populism to his advantage. He was gaining in popularity among the common man. He was becoming a social force, and because he disregarded so much of the social structure that made life live-able for most of the people most of the time, though they were casual in courting its coming undone. So, let’s see if we can get him to say something really out there, something really against the accepted norm.

What he said, though, how he replied: this reveals his understanding that the world is a realm of both the provisional and the eternal, both the good enough for now and the good that will abide forever. The world is created good and is yet incomplete, unfinished, imperfect. Therefore God provides solutions for now, and holds out the perfect as our aim and our end.

Divorce is a provision allowed for in the law, but it isn’t the good that God intends—which are words not meant to condemn but to acknowledge that divorce is a far from ideal. Though sometimes the better option (when a marriage is abusive, when a marriage has suffered a mortal wound from which it cannot recover, when a marriage is dead and slowly killing the two people involved), divorce is far from the happy outcome that is the aim of marriage.

This is what I hear in what Jesus had to say—this and more.

It's the "more" where things get really interesting.

Nowhere in the Law was it stated or implied that women, wives, could be the victims of adultery. Women could be adulterers, but they couldn't be a party against whom a husband might be adulterous. It wasn't possible; it wasn't conceivable. Husbands had a right to expect that their wives not commit adultery against them, and they had legal recourse in case their wives did. But wives had no equal right to expect the same of their husbands. If husbands had sexual relations outside their marriage, that was, if not fine, then at least unsurprising and acceptable. Whatever, it certainly wasn't adultery! So, what could Jesus possibly have meant when he said, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her"?

What's more, nowhere in the Law was it stated or implied that a wife might divorce her husband. The one to take the action of initiating divorce was always the husband. Divorce, when done, was always done by the man to the woman. It was never to be an action a woman might take and do to a man. So, what could Jesus possibly have meant when he said, "...and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery"?

This stunning equality between men and women in marriage that Jesus seemed not just to imply but to assume, however, is laid out even before he appropriates legal provisions to benefit both women and men. It's laid out when he refers to, and indeed reinterprets, the story of humans and human partnerships from the earliest chapters of Genesis.

To begin, he pulled on the first creation story. (Remember, there are two creation stories in the Bible, one in Genesis One [that of the seven days], and the second in Genesis Two, which is what we heard this morning.) Jesus comingled them, laying the foundation of his point to the Pharisees with the first, claiming: "God made them male and female," which is quite different from the notion that woman is derived from man: "God made them male and female," created them at the same time, not with Woman being an afterthought.

Then he referred to the second creation story, in which Woman is derived of Man, but he put a slant on it. "For this reason," he claimed, "a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife," which strikes a different tone in my hearing; it evokes a different image. In the original, it's said that the man clings to his wife, which evokes for me either needy desperation or defensive ownership as if she were but a possession. (Interesting that Jesus told Mary on Easter morning, "Do not *cling* to me, for I haven't yet ascended to the Father.") But either way, it doesn't cast marriage as something I'd be long interested in—either desperately needed or possessively

gripped. Jesus, though, speaks of a man joining his wife, which to my hearing promises equality in this partnership—and that *does* sound appealing.

Jesus was a radical. When it comes to gender politics, Jesus was a radical.

And Jesus ushered in something now familiar.

Really, if equality among married partners is considered radical, it really shouldn't be.

And nowadays it hardly is. On the contrary, the most against-the-grain spokesperson on marriage I can think of these days is once-child-star Candace Cameron who made waves not long ago when she spoke of her marriage as one of submission to her husband since, as a “Christian” fundamentalist, she understands him as the rightful head of the household.

She, and others like her, would explain that, when it comes to a group—like a family or a household—someone needs to be in charge. What they might not say (because it takes further insight) is that when it comes to two people working in close relationship with one another, it's very, very difficult not to fall into a mimetic crisis as to who should conform to whom.

Sadly, I think she and her ilk are not wrong. I also happen to think this is why the 70s and 80s saw such an enormous rise in divorce, which has now leveled off or is even in decline (though perhaps because fewer people are getting married). The feminist movement so utterly changed our collective understanding of a “woman's proper place” (and thank God it did) that the marriages established prior to, say, the early-80s could only hardly make the journey from one paradigm to the next.

As it happens, Jesus had in mind a solution to this problem.

It might have seemed like a *non sequitor* in the reading. That Jesus went from talking about marriage and divorce, to receiving children and proclaiming their worth: it might have seemed like one thing that didn't quite follow from the other. It might have seemed simply as if circumstances around Jesus changed as he went along on that day: some Pharisees approached him, and then went away, and the people started bringing children to him, and the disciples tried to send them away. And maybe that's it. Maybe it was as simple as when I go into the post office and so talk about what I'm mailing (a pair of jeans that didn't fit) and then go into the library and discuss the book I'm about to return Coates's *Between the World and Me*, crucial reading). It's just a flow of events that determines themes and concerns.

Or maybe there's something about the way children are that might speak to the way a marriage of two equal partners might sustain itself.

We wonder a lot at what it might be about children that makes them uniquely qualified to enter the kingdom of God. In what way must we “receive the kingdom of God as a little child” or else never enter it at all? What does that mean? And we suppose it’s that children are guileless, and so we should be guileless. Or we suppose it’s that children are wonder-full, and so we must full of wonder. (Isn’t this what we practice when we gather for Godly Play: “I wonder...”?) Or is that children are credulous? They’ll believe anything! Really, what is it about children that their reception of the kingdom of God makes it possible for them to enter the kingdom of God?

Come to think of it, what’s a child?

We come up with definitions. A child is anyone under the age of twelve, or thirteen. A child is anyone under the age of sixteen, or eighteen, or twenty-one.

So, how about this—a child is anyone who has a parent.

“Child” is a relative term, which is to say it implies relationship—and the relationship it implies is that of child and parent. To be a child is to have protected in status in society: if you don’t have a parent, one will be provided for you. It’s to have full entitlement to a protected status: if you end up on the inside of our border without documentation, we have even more complicated feelings about what to do with you. After all, your parents sent you here, or your parents called you here.

To be a child is also to have a trusting relationship with someone who is watching out for you, who you know is watching out for you—which is, I think, what any and all of us need fully to enter the kingdom of Heaven. The notion that God is that which watches out for me, for us; the assurance that I am seen and known, that we are each loved and beloved, desired and delightful: to be a child is to regard ourselves as all these things before God. Only by this can we fully be amidst the kingdom of Heaven—for to be amidst the kingdom of Heaven is to be so known and loved.

It’s also the way that two equal parties in partnership might be sustained in their dynamic equality without ever falling into hierarchical tendencies.

So, perhaps the children coming to Jesus presented just the solution to marriage whose aim is equality and equal thriving for both partners, but whose easy tendency is toward hierarchy and someone “being in charge” and “taking charge.”

I’ll tell you this, as a loving parent to both Tobias and Jack, I’d never ask Jack to submit to Toby, and I’d never ask Toby to submit to Jack. Instead, I hope and labor always to make room for both of them in our family relating—Tobias’s serious authority and Jack’s charismatic power. And, yes, siblings aren’t marital partners, but it is the sibling relationship where many of us get our first crack at committed partnership.

To be a child is to have a loving parent, and this is to have the set of mind and heart to enter the Kingdom of God. And to be a husband or wife is to join with someone else both as children whose parent desires each to thrive and rise.

I had many feminist heroes in college whose work I studied: Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Marilyn Frye Nancy Hartstock. And just last night, I watched *Nine to Five* with the boys. I can't tell you how many times I choked up, got teary. (As for them, they were astonished at the world then as depicted in that movie.) That Jesus might stand among these is something of a delight to me, and not at all far fetched. That they might feast at the same table—all serving, all being served—is this morning anyway how the Kingdom glimmers before me, a promise even now being fulfilled.

Thanks be to God.