20th Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 2:18-24 Mark 10:2-16

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Oct. 6, 2024

A week ago yesterday I attended a program at St. Joseph's College in Standish, Maine led by a Catholic priest named Father John Dear. The day-long event was devoted to the topic of nonviolence, focusing our attention on the power of nonviolent resistance as exemplified in the lives of Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

Father John Dear, himself an internationally known peace activist who has been jailed many times for his acts of nonviolent civil disobedience, invited us to see the kingdom of God to which Jesus bore witness, as the "kingdom of nonviolence," and to see Jesus as a "movement organizer," his life dedicated to looking for followers to join his global campaign of active nonviolence.

I was inspired by the day. Challenged by the day. Humbled by the day. Indicted by the day. Given much to ponder by the day. But one of the things I was most surprised to learn was that Mahatma Gandi, a devout Hindu, who in many ways lived the non-violent way of Jesus far more seriously and authentically than most Christians (including this one)… Mahatma Gandhi began and ended each day by reading the Beatitudes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew…

For forty years… through many campaigns of nonviolent civil disobedience and jailings and abuses, as Gandhi used what MLK later

called “soul force” to stand up to colonial rule, he read Jesus’ words every morning and every evening…

Blessed are the poor in spirit…

Blessed are those who mourn…

Blessed are the meek…

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst

for righteousness…

Blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart…

Blessed are the peacemakers…

Blessed are those who are persecuted for

righteousness sake, for theirs is the

kingdom of heaven…

And what I came to understand in thinking about Gandhi’s careful attention to these words at both the beginning and the ending of his day was that Jesus’ Beatitudes became the **“frame”** through which he looked at the world… the “frame” through which he looked for guidance and inspiration and hope as he stood up nonviolently and creatively to the powers that be, including the brutal practices and policies of British Colonial rule in South Africa…

Imagine the Beatitudes being a “frame” through which to look in the shaping of one’s life, in the making of one’s decisions, in the ordering of one’s priorities…

I offer this image of a piece of Scripture being a "frame" through which to shape our lives in the challenges, the beauty and the complexities of this world, because I think, even with all its thorny issues and unfortunate interpretations, this morning's Gospel text from Mark offers us such a frame in this moment of unspeakable animosity, hatred, scapegoating and violence, not only in the world at large, but also in our own country, in our own communities, in our own families, and in our own hearts… A frame I suggest, that has at its center an image of the oneness of creation, each part and person in harmonious relationship with the other… a perfect manifestation of the kingdom of God…

I know it sounds crazy… **this text of all texts**… the first part of which has been used in the Church for centuries to shame and blame people who have been divorced, to coerce women to stay in abusive relationships, and, in some denominational settings, to deny people access to the Eucharist…

Really, you might well ask, how could **this text** ever be used as a "frame" through which to look for guidance and inspiration as we try to resist the voices both within us and outside us that tempt us to "other," to divide, to dehumanize and to demean those who are not part of our tribe, our political party, our denomination, our religious affiliation… How could **this text** be a frame through which to look for help in quelling the violence that rages around and within us and for seeing a way of being that is reflective of the kingdom of God?

If this is your question, it's a good one… And really, we'd need a good two-hour Bible study to break open the text in a way that would adequately address your probable resistance to its being used as a "frame" for helping us to quell our tendencies to divide and deride…

But there are a few points I could make of a "Bible study nature" that might help… And I can think of no better place to start than with a poem the Reverend Richard Mallory sent me after we talked about this text last Wednesday in Bible study… A poem by Pastor and poet Steve Garnass-Holmes in response to our Gospel text from Mark 10… A poem titled, "Divorce," and subtitled, "What God has joined together, let no one separate."

Divorce

Don't pick this up as a club to beat divorcees.
It's already caused enough harm.

Only men had the power to marry or divorce.
Jesus was protecting women from being used
and discarded.

Jesus' accusers want to know what's lawful;
but he always seeks what is life-giving.

Sometimes when a couple has married
it's not God that has joined them.

What God has joined together is a whole person;
don't let a bad marriage break them.

Sometimes what keeps the "bent over woman" down
Is a marriage from which Jesus would set her free.

Sometimes the paralyzed need to get up and walk away first;
only then can healing begin.

Sometimes when Jesus says, "Follow me"
there are things he wants one to leave behind.

Always and ever Jesus invites us
not toward what is lawful but what is life-giving.

Rarely can Bible study feel poetic in nature. But in his poem Steve Garnass-Holmes manages to remind us that according to Deuteronomic Law, a man could divorce a woman simply because she displeased him, leaving her without financial support, without a home, without a community in which to feel a sense of belonging… marginalized, vulnerable…

He reminds us as well that many people who interacted with Jesus (including both the religious authorities and Jesus' followers themselves) were forever asking questions that were looking for practical, measurable, justifiable and lawful answers… "How many times must I forgive?" "How much should I give to Caesar?" "Is it permissible for me to divorce my wife?"

When all along Jesus was inviting them to be less concerned about what is "allowed" by law and tradition, and more attuned to what is intended in the kingdom of God…

Both Steve Garnass-Holmes' poem and Mark 10 directing their readers back to the creation story in **Genesis 2, where we find the original Biblical frame through which to see the world**… a frame that has at its center true, authentic, enfleshed, God-given, God-spirited, God-saturated relationship, in which what has been joined together cannot be made separate…

Mark 10, as thorny and challenging as it is, directs our attention there, to the beginning, where we see God's intention for creation most profoundly, poignantly, and fully exemplified in a union of two persons joined bone to bone and flesh to flesh by the God who has already joined them breath to breath as all of creation rejoices for the beauty and wonder of it all…

This is the frame through which Mark's Jesus would have the Pharisees look when they come to him asking if it's lawful for a man to divorce his wife… "Of course it's lawful," Jesus said in so many words… "You know this already through the law of Moses… It's a law given because of your hard-heartedness… A law given as an **accommodation to the human struggle, not an expression of the Divine ideal…**

"But I challenge you to look through the frame of relationship and compassion and mutual caring instead of trying to figure out what's lawful," Jesus says to the Pharisees…

Just as he said later to his disciples when they asked him again about divorce, this time shaking the old Deuteronomic Law up by suggesting that in the inevitable brokenness of relationships, women

ought to have the same right to divorce their husbands as men had to divorce their wives…

It was a declaration of **radical justice and inclusion**, just as welcoming children would have been at the time, children having as little social standing as women… This story about Jesus welcoming children coming right after the text about divorce, as if to say they are connected by their mutual mandate to radical inclusion and well-being for all.

As thorny and as challenging as Mark 10 is, Mark is inviting us to look honestly and truthfully at our broken, grieving world, fractured by division and divorce and acrimony and hatred and war, and he's asking us to look through a frame that offers something totally different by which to live our lives…

(Yes of course recognizing that "*Sometimes the paralyzed need to get up and walk away first, because only then can healing begin.* And that *"Sometimes when Jesus says, "Follow me" there are things he wants one to leave behind.")*

But in the midst of the inevitable breaking of relationships, Mark is giving us a frame through which to look and by which to make our choices and decisions, as fully and completely as we possibly can… inviting us to shape our lives not by what is "lawful" or "justifiable," but by what is life-giving… what is reflective of the inclusive, unboundaried, compassionate kin-dom of God, where everyone and every creature has a place at the table, and all of creation is "whole" in the fullness and the beauty which God intends…

So, we might well ask, however do we muster the courage and the resolve to do such a thing in our world right now? What would that look like? What would it mean?

Particularly as we gather this morning, on the eve of the one-year anniversary of October 7 and the brutal attack on Isreal by Hamas, which sparked a conflict that as of the end of September has claimed the lives of 1,706 Israelis… and 41,431 Palestinians… and 224 humanitarian aid workers… That conflict now spilling over into Lebanon and Yemen…

Even as war continues in Ukraine and Sudan and all we hear in our own political landscape is hatred and vitriol and lies and more lies and more lies…

However do we live in these times as Jesus would want us to live? What would it mean to look through Mark 10 as we went out of our doors into the world each morning? Or, as Mahatma Gandhi did for forty years of his life, through the frame of the Beatitudes? What would that look like? What would it mean?

This is what we need to talk about in the community of faith… This is why we need to study the works of Deitrich Bonhoffer, and Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., and by the way the life of Jesus… This is why we need each other… This is why we need to speak the words of confession and hear the liberating words of forgiveness… This is why we need to receive the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation… This is why we need to say over and over again, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God…”

As odd as it might sound, I want to suggest that this is a very good time to be the Church… because what we do now and in the days to

come will matter. And as we consider what conversations we will have and how we will bear witness to the radical, unconditional, fierce and tender love of Jesus, I will leave you this morning with three things…

One of course is the frame Mark 10 has given us to hold up as we look truthfully at the brokenness both within us and around us… the frame that holds up for us to see the kind-dom of God, all of creation joined together bone to bone, flesh to flesh, breath to breath, heart to heart… A vision to guide us in the decisions we make in the ordinary moments of our days…

Secondly, there is an exercise a Tibetan monk asks guests at his monastery to try when they are visiting… Acknowledging that our world in this moment is what he calls "a sea of clenched fists," the monk invites his guests to clench a fist with one hand, and then move to force that fist open with the other hand… "Notice," he says, "the first fist only clenches tighter – as if by its own will, a natural reaction to force"…

And then the monk invites his guests to try a counterintuitive approach; that is, he asks them to cradle the clenched fist with the other hand and to notice how, with the same naturalness, but a wholly other quality of feeling and response, the first releases… and softens…

And lastly, this little story… *A Native American grandfather was talking to his grandson about how he felt after the tragedy of 9-11. "I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart," the grandfather said. One wolf is the vengeful, angry violent one. The other is the loving, compassionate one."*

The grandson asked him, "Which one will win the fight in your heart?"

The grandfather answered, "The one I feed."

Following in the way of Jesus is the hardest work in the world there is to do, dear friends… So let us begin here… in this place where the love of Jesus unclenches our fists and opens our hands and hearts to receive his body, broken for each of us and for the sake of the world God so loves…

Let us begin here, because where else can we learn how to live this kind + of life? *(make a frame with my hands).*