

Reflection on World Communion Sunday October 4, 2015

Some Pharisees came and, trying to test Jesus, they asked, "Does the Law allow a man to divorce his wife?" Jesus answered, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a divorce certificate and to divorce his wife." Jesus said to them, "He wrote this commandment for you because of your unyielding hearts. At the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. Because of this, a man should leave his father and mother and be joined together with his wife, and the two will be one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, humans must not pull apart what God has put together." Inside the house, the disciples asked Jesus again about this. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if a wife divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

People were bringing children to Jesus so that He would bless them. But the disciples scolded them. When Jesus saw this, He grew angry and said to them, "Allow the children to come to Me. Don't forbid them, because God's kingdom belongs to people like these children. I assure you that whoever doesn't welcome God's kingdom like a child will never enter it." Then Jesus hugged the children and blessed them.

Mark 10:2-16

I was eleven years old when I met my first divorced person. We had moved across town away from our mostly Catholic and Mormon neighborhood to a new neighborhood. With a divorced woman next door. I was leery of her, and I think now that it was some cultural understanding (not from church or from my parents but some cultural bias) that divorce was a bad thing. Our new neighbor, Laverne, became one of my favorite neighbors, ever. From the time I was eleven years old until I left for college, she treated me as an adult; interested in me, interested in what I thought. My sister and I would go next door on "date night" and do Laverne's eye make-up, which was its own learning experience for me into the glamorous world of adult dating. (Yes, feel free to laugh at that.)

Cultural understanding and assumptions stealthily creep into our beliefs and prejudices, like smoke seeps unnoticed under a door. We sleep through it... the smoke silently filling the room, until we awake choking, our lungs filled with polluted air. As a child I didn't know anything really, about divorce (and we were Presbyterians so I don't think it was a hot-button topic in the church) but a cultural understanding that seeped under the door of how I saw the world, informed me that divorce was a bad thing. I'm pretty sure now at this point in my life that Laverne, a divorced woman, was the real scandal to me, because I knew a woman's place in the world. I saw it played out every day, I breathed it in. It was more than cultural, it was biblically informed, because there were no women leaders in my church, there were no women clergy. Paul wrote to the early church, and later his disciple Timothy, wrote about the role of a Christian woman. She was submissive. She was respectful of all elders. She was not a leader, nor a teacher, over any man. And most importantly, she was silent. If she had theological questions she was to wait and ask her husband about it at home.

Sometimes people are treated as less than made in the glorious image of God... because of what's written in the bible.

This is not a sermon about divorce or marriage, both of which Christians play biblical volleyball with. The bible says "this" about divorce (and in some churches divorced people can't serve as leaders or be pastors.) The bible says "that" about marriage (and in some churches gays and lesbians can't marry or be ordained.)

It was a patriarchal world Jesus was born into. It was a cultural understanding that men were born with power, and it rightly belonged to them. Polygamy was the model of biblical marriage: as many wives for a man as he could afford to buy. Women were property, owned by their fathers, husbands, and other male relatives. (It sounds like I'm on a suffragette soapbox but stay with me... I'm working my way toward Jesus. I'm moving us toward love.) A man could easily discard a wife through divorce, making her a victim of poverty, prostitution, and helplessness. In the ancient patriarchal world children were also seen as dispensable. On the social ladder of power and importance, a child's value was underneath that of a woman.

Jesus was born into this world, this hierarchical and patriarchal world, where connection with, and obedience to God, was made known through rules and laws. Jesus' mission was to show humanity the heart of God, and so at every turn Jesus overturned scriptural Law, and confronted cultural assumption by how He saw (the way He noticed) and cared for, and gave dignity and worth to... the ways He loved... all kinds of people.

This lesson about divorce, this teaching moment, Jesus had with the Pharisees, the keepers and fierce protectors of the Law of Moses, and later with His disciples, was about the worth and dignity and innate value of some of society's most vulnerable people: women and children. This lesson was about seeing people as God sees us. Jesus' words about divorce and remarriage were meant to create protection around women, who could be easily cast outside, into a social and financial abyss by a displeased and dissatisfied husband. In His teaching about the harsh consequences of divorce Jesus was both pointing to the coming Kingdom of God, where there will be no broken relationships, and where love will heal and bind all humanity; (I think that's worth saying again. This is the "Pay attention" part of the lesson for all of us: in the Kingdom of God there are no broken relationships. Love will heal and bind us all. And where we can, where we are able, we can start building the Kingdom now by healing brokenness in our relationships.) Jesus was also demonstrating God's concern and care for vulnerable people, and the innate worth of all of us. Because what Jesus did always pointed to love, to God's inclusive love, the Christian understanding of divorce, in spite of Jesus' words, is that sometimes it is necessary. Sometimes divorce protects women, and men, and children. Christians recognize that divorced people are no less loved by God, and no less valued and included in God's Kingdom than anyone else.

Just as in the world Jesus was born into, religious people continue to draw circles that keep others out. People from the wrong countries, the wrong religions, the wrong political affiliations, the wrong sexual orientation... we use lines from scripture to draw circles around ourselves, to keep the wrong people out of the Kingdom of God. Most of the time, I think, this is not done out of mean-spiritedness but out of the subtle smoke of cultural bias that we inhale. Jesus Himself drew circles... but they were circles

of love and protection that invited people in... especially people who had been excluded. The circles Jesus drew were permeable, easy to enter into, where the weak, the vulnerable, the sick, the outsider, the disenfranchised, and the seemingly disposable, were welcomed and valued.

Jesus held children in the circle of His arms as an illustration to His friends, those closest to Him, who couldn't see God's love in the flesh even though He was in their sight. (Apparently we are born blind, and it takes years and years of loving and being loved to open our eyes to see our worth and beauty, and the worth and beauty of all creation.) Jesus held children in His arms as a wordless lesson (I know there were words but I think before He spoke He gave the disciples "the look" in order to say to them, "Listen up.") The lesson was that those who have the least power and influence, those who are the easiest to overlook, and those who are regarded as the most expendable, are equally loved by God, and perhaps... have the most to teach us.

There is a yoga pose called "the child" and the posture is kneeling, with arms out in front, forehead to the floor, with the heart above the head. Jesus' lessons were always about love, and that love is above (higher, holier, closer to God) than rules, than religious Law, than the circles drawn to keep people in their place. Even scripture - even scripture! - must bow to love. Because. God. is. love.

I am amazed at long I've been a practicing Christian and how often I have to learn the lesson that God's first language is love; love above rules, above division, logic, cultural understanding, and personal preferences. And when the Holy Spirit reminds me of the child's pose (humble, trusting, heart above the head) I'm able to know and experience God's love in the deepest places in me. I'm able to disconnect from judging others, and to be immersed in love. That love has to spill over onto others... even others I would not choose to love.

God's love, God's inclusive, welcoming, all-encompassing love, for me, and for you, and for every one of us, is bigger than we can imagine. Be like a child, Jesus said, and imagine love big enough to heal, forgive, include, and transform. That love brings me to my knees.

Whatever our cultural understanding of people who are "the other" - that is, different than we are - outside our circle of comfort; our preference of how people live (for me, as an eleven year old, it was my neighbor Laverne;) and whatever bible verses we can quote to keep people in or people out... Jesus says to us, take the child's pose. Humbly be on your knees, hands outstretched, forehead to the floor; heart above the head.

Today, with Christians around the world, we come to the Lord's Table to celebrate the mystery of love. Love and unity in Christ is what we celebrate on this day, World Communion Sunday. Our song, as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table, is in the bulletin. "Let us break bread together on our knees." Please sing it with me.