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The Rev. Kate Byrd

“Let the little children come to me”

Do you remember the first time you felt love? I don't know if I remember truly the first time, but I remember lots of bits and pieces. I remember my parents embracing me with relief, after I broke my Great Grandmother's Chinoiserie Vase, instead of fussing me out till kingdom. As I had used it to secure a blanket fort on a table top, which promptly failed as the vase came shattering down on my head. I remember my grandfather, a stern and stoic individual, who spent most afternoons listening to books on tape, chasing me around the house in a game of hide and go seek, which was all but rigged as he was blind. I remember phone calls from family friends and relatives who gave up their busy schedules to distract me from bursting the chicken pox that littered my body, as I sat with one hand on the phone and the other covered by an oven mit. It was all these little things that weren't all that significant in the moment, but over time allowed me to know, at least when it mattered most, that I was made for love. And, I can't speak for the whole, but I know for myself, as a child, it felt like the world was that way, riddled with all these little magical moments. Teachers who took time to listen as I painfully tried to solve math problems I could barely fathom, Vacation Bible School volunteers and camp counselors who let you sit on their lap and gave up a week of work to watch strangers children, lunch ladies who knew your name and always gave you an extra helping of your favorite cake. All, giving their time, sharing their knowledge, and focusing their attention on you. For no seemingly good reason, but that we are made for goodness and we were made to love and be loved. And, more so that children, for one reason or another, are the ones most receptive and willing to participate in it.

Our passage from Mark this morning is one of the more difficult passages we have in our gospels. Shared by Matthew and Luke, Jesus' words on divorce can be difficult to swallow. Especially considering the fact that human relationships are, if nothing else, really hard. Even more so when we have committed to be in said relationship for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part. As we hear those coming to test and trip up Jesus ask, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” to which Jesus responds, as he so often and unhelpfully does, with a question, “What did Moses command you?” As they respond back, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” Moving Jesus to say, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.” And, while Jesus' response, at first, feels more like a rebuttal, or even a rebuke of Moses' accommodation for divorce. I wonder if it is meant instead as a reminder, or even a higher calling, of what marriage, and more so human relations, could be.

Now, I will stop and say, our passage from Mark is difficult, even painful, because it has historically been used not only to keep people in toxic, even damaging relationships. But, also because it has been used to admonish those who do not follow a heteronormative lifestyle. And, while we could hear Jesus in this way, I don't suggest it. And more so, I think it would deny the larger context and intent of Jesus' words, which are surrounded and upheld by his desire to give us life and life to the fullest. As we find his response to the question of divorce embedded in his call to care for and welcome the least of these, the forgotten, the overlooked, the disregarded. Recalling our passage from last week, when Jesus commanded his own disciples not to put a stumbling block before one of these little ones, as he calls for them instead to cut off their arm or pluck out their eye should it cause them to trip up the least of these, and (quote

unquote) “sin”. Bringing us back to this week as Jesus says to us, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” Bringing the Pharisees' attention back to the heart of the matter, which has nothing to do with getting stuck in the minutiae of this law or that, but that there is a larger picture. Which for Jesus includes how we bring the kingdom of God here and now. And more so, which Jesus suggests and encourages, is by taking on the posture of a little child.

Last week I got to participate in my first day of Reading Buddies at South Smithfield Elementary. A volunteer project we have started with our local elementary school to support kids in their ability to succeed and thrive in school and life through reading. And as I walked into the third grade classroom, I will admit I was a bit hesitant if not down right nervous. I wasn't exactly sure what I was supposed to do. But, as the teacher showed me the table where I could listen to the kids read, and instructed the first student to go over, I soon had a line of overly excited children all clamoring to be next to read to me. As they welcomed me, for lack of a better term, with open arms and hearts, for no other reason than I showed up and was present to listen and be with them. And, I wonder if this is what Jesus means when he asks us to receive the kingdom of God like a child? With open arms and hearts, with joy and excitement, as we find it is there ready for us to participate ready for us to take part. In and as much as we can accept it, know it, and more so share it with others.

Here, Jesus' teachings both on divorce and on the kingdom of heaven point to what it means, to truly love. First, through marriage (or other dedicated relationship between two people based on mutual love) as we are invited to live into and live out God's dream for human relationship. As it invites us to give ourselves over so fully to another person that we are able to, essentially, become one. As we begin, to more fully comprehend and participate in what it means to surrender our lives, our bodies, our whole selves to another. And second, through the kingdom of heaven, as he equates it to the little children. The ones who are both most open and most vulnerable. The ones whose needs are greatest and whose hearts are most open. Allowing us to glimpse and maybe even begin to see that our participation in the kingdom of God is as available as our ability to love and be loved.

Today, it seems to me, we are not being admonished for the pain we may carry from our past broken relationships, nor from our inability to live into whatever a “traditional” family may be defined as. Instead, we are being invited to live into something greater, something life giving, something like the kingdom of God which we can find here and now in and as much as we can be open to the love that loved us first. Returning to our ability to share in mutual vulnerability and receptivity to the love of God and of others. An unadulterated love that we have all been created to share, and know, and grow, like a little piece of heaven here on earth.