

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost – John Brittingham

Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

I don't want to preach this week. Is it too late to ask someone else to do it? See, I'm fine preaching when it's clear that God's justice is gonna flow like a mighty river or that community is important or that Jesus is being subversive in all those ways that makes more "left-leaning" bourgeois Christians like myself respond with a modest Amen.

I like psalms of lament and wisdom literature talking about meaninglessness (I'm a philosopher after all...) and Jesus being awesome or humble or whatever other virtue that lines up with my own theological outlook. I don't like it when Jesus delivers a hard teaching or when the psalmist comes across like a self-righteous complainer or when we have to talk about Job. Can't you let me off the hook for just this one Sunday and let me talk about something else—even something as mundane as, "And put they the little bits into the little pots." (That's not scripture, that's Monty Python—so it's almost scripture...)

But we don't live in a world where everything that is made into a joke deserves such treatment. We live in a world where we need to think deeply about hard teachings, about broken relationships, and about pain coming even to those who are innocent.

Now the attentive listener might have caught a few words repeated throughout our lectionary passages, leading them to conclude that what we need to talk about in all of these hard passages is integrity. How does one remain complete or held together when faced with distress or catastrophe?

The difficulty with talking about integrity is that, if we don't pay careful attention to its use in these lectionary passages, we end up thinking that the lesson from these scriptures is that we need to maintain something of a "stiff upper lip" or a united front or any other number of Churchill-isms when confronted with painful circumstances. Yet the idea of integrity as "keeping it all together" is brilliantly challenged by our lectionary passages, as we shall see.

Reading the book of Job can be an odd experience, given how peculiar the book itself is. It's one of those books that seems more like a fable than a historical account. We are not intended to see in Job a detailed testimony of life in ancient Uz, any more than we are to take the dialogues of Plato as a report on the streets of Athens. Instead, we are meant to contemplate Job—it is a wisdom book, after all. We must ponder Job's hard truths and harder questions without being given any historical caveats to hide from its difficulty.

Job is a blameless man. He is without fault in his behavior and his thoughts, to the point that God singles him out for praise. But I'm getting ahead of myself. This is a fable and we have to set the scene. We know that Job is our protagonist from the start. But then we jump ahead a chapter, to the court of the Almighty, where all the heavenly beings come to present themselves before God. This includes Satan, although the mere mention of this character's name requires something of a lengthy verbal footnote. Satan is not the villain of Milton's Paradise Lost or Dante's Divine Comedy or South Park's Bigger, Louder, and Uncut. No, in the context of

Job it is best to think of Satan as The Accuser or The Adversary. And even more confusingly, The Adversary is a servant of God. He is a character in God's court, not unlike a jester or an advisor. The passage makes this clear: The Adversary works on God's behalf to test Job's resolve. The scene between God and Satan unfolds more like a dispute over the ins and outs of a friendly bet than a war over the soul of a human being. It's actually kind of funny, even if there is a person whose wellbeing is in distress.

But the passage we're given is not really about God's court or Satan's insistence that God keep his end of the bet. All of that is context. You could remove the interaction between God and Satan and you're still left with the action of Job's paradoxical blamelessness and unspeakable pain. He is afflicted with such pain in his body that he can only take a potshard to scrape the sores that cover his body. How can one persist in one's integrity, how can one keep it together, under such pain? Would it not be understandable to curse God and die? For these questions, Job provides no real answers.

But Job does provide us with a reason to ponder the meaning of integrity. Integrity has two dominant meanings in the Hebrew: the first is completeness, as in the integrity of a bridge being determined by how well it is held together. Such completeness comes across as fundamentally a bodily thing. Clearly, given his sores and his destitution, Job is not a man of this kind of integrity. Maybe the second dominant use of integrity makes sense. Maybe Job is one who persists in his innocence, in his blamelessness. He is not at fault in his suffering. Sometimes there is no reason pain is inflicted. Sometimes there is no villain to be vanquished or sin to be repented. Sometimes we suffer and that is all.

We are meant to wrestle with Job and the questions it raises, and sit in the darkness for a while. Job is a book that makes us well acquainted with affliction, but it is not necessarily a good book for those who have remained in darkness for quite some time. "Oh, you're depressed and destitute and cut off from all your friends and family—here's a book about how suffering happens and God doesn't answer your questions about why, except to say something to the effect of, 'I'm God, deal with it.'" Clearly, this is not a good approach to helping those who remain in darkness.

Yet helping those who have been cast out into the realm of darkness is, I'll attempt to argue, what Jesus' hard teaching about divorce is all about. We can't skip this passage on divorce and relationships and jump right to the part about Jesus welcoming children because it feels good. As one commentator said about this passage, "If it's read aloud in the congregation, you have to talk about it." This same commentator went on to say that a parishioner who had been through a nasty divorce felt this gospel reading was like having garbage poured all over her.¹ Given this hard teaching, one can't treat it in a superficial manner and think one's played a winning hand (as it were). I would like to note that one of the reasons I still might want to chicken out of preaching these texts is because I don't have firsthand experience with divorce in such a way that I can draw from it for understanding or examples. I'm out of my depth here and I don't want to lead y'all to believe that I have some great ideas about divorce or the pain of broken relationships and their consequences. Still, we live in a world where divorce has impacted just about everyone's life in one way or another. Whether it is friends who separated, parents,

¹ The commentator mentioned here is one of the "Pulpit Fiction" podcasters who mention the two stories here.

siblings, pastors, teachers, and so on..., American life is in no place untouched by the difficulty of divorce. And passages like this one are both helpful and harmful depending on the context. So let's examine the passage more closely.

The passage begins by saying that some Pharisees had come to test Jesus. The testing part is important. They want to trap Jesus in some legalistic entanglement where he shows his lack of qualifications as a good rabbi. Thus, Jesus' response is not the answer of someone making a grand pronouncement, it is a particular answer to a question meant to trap him. We should further note that the teaching on divorce, the teaching with the disciples, and the section on children are connected.

Now the Pharisees ask Jesus if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. This question requires a great deal of context so that we hear it and Jesus' response with a modicum of historical understanding. Perhaps the most crucial bit of context involves the concept of the marriage relationship that was dominant in the ancient world. For the majority of human history, marriage was a business relationship wherein a woman was purchased as property. There was no idea of marriage as a loving and edifying relationship between soulmates or equal partners. Women were property who were necessary for maintaining lines of heritage. What I might be suggesting is that the concept of "biblical marriage" is not a wife and children and a dog and an SUV and onDemand cable and a house with a fence. Maybe we should be happy that certain aspects of biblical marriage are not emphasized anymore.

The second crucial bit of information necessary for properly contextualizing this passage is that divorce was nothing like it is nowadays. Divorce in the 1st century was not at all the phenomenon we see in our 21st century. The allowance for divorce in the Old Testament comes from Moses—as the Pharisees clearly point out. In Deuteronomy 24:1, Moses states, *When a man has taken a wife, and married her, and it comes to pass that she find no favor in his eyes, because he has found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorce, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house.*

From this passage we can see a few things: primarily that divorce was intended to be a sign of compassion but turned into an injustice and a way to discard women and their needs. Ancient divorce was always initiated by the man; it could be for something as simple as the woman burning a man's coats. It would leave the woman property-less, destitute, and with the options of prostitution and begging for the sake of survival.

So when Jesus says that it is because of the hardness of the hearts of men that divorce was made allowable, he is saying something quite radical. Let us look at his response to the Pharisees carefully. He says, *Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.* Notice that Jesus does not explicitly prohibit divorce. Instead he points to God's design. God intends people to be in a fully partnered relationship. It is because of "you" (Pharisees, et al.) that Moses had to write a writ of divorce. God's design was not for humans to

be destitute and cut off from relationships, yet that is what the common practice of ancient divorce amounted to.

Instead, Jesus flips the concept on its head. The divorcer commits adultery against **her** (the wife). This changes the concept of adultery. Adultery originally was seen as a problem of defiling one's property. The man was able to have sex with anyone but a married woman. Why? Because the married woman was the property of a man; thus committing adultery was an infringement upon the property of another. By discarding the woman in divorce, Jesus says that you are disenfranchising **her**.

This is a radical thought within context. It is empowering women to be seen as something more than property, to see relationships as something more than just economic transactions. Yet we should not be seeing Jesus as flippant when it comes to divorce. There is no part of this passage where God is saying, "You know what's awesome? Broken relationships." Healthy, partnered relationships, where people are valued **as people**, are emphasized here, and not what has become known as a heteronormative nuclear family. Instead, Jesus is emphasizing that partnership that is life-affirming is crucial.

Lest you think that Jesus is saying everyone should get married and stay married regardless of the circumstances, provided that their partners are affirmed, I'd ask you to remember just who this Jesus is. This is the same Jesus who said that his family were those who follow him; he said that he had come to turn father against son and mother against daughter. Family for Jesus is not the same thing as family for us. Moreover, scripture affirms elsewhere the importance of singleness, of different forms of partnership and family. It is an anachronism to assume that family means whatever an American sitcom says it means.

The section on children echoes this thought. These are not Jesus' children, but the children of those who have wanted to see him. Children are marginalized in this culture and yet he is welcoming them in. Jesus, therefore, shows us a hard teaching that might seem like it is about keeping people out, about excluding them, but actually includes them. Jesus empowers women and welcomes children.

What are we to make of Job and Jesus and the possible connection between the two? What does pain and integrity have to do with divorce and children? I would like to suggest this line of thought as a way to connect these two difficult teachings.

As I said before, integrity has two dominant definitions: completeness and blamelessness. It is hard to keep alive the idea of integrity as completeness when we see lives and relationships that are frayed and damaged. It is hard to keep up appearances of having it all together or maintaining a "stiff upper lip" when suffering undoes us. Suffering of all kinds, the writer John Green says, breaks language. It cannot be communicated in words. There is hardly any completeness in that. But integrity as blamelessness—perhaps that definition works. Job was innocent—he had done nothing wrong—but God allowed him to suffer anyway. He remained innocent in his response to suffering. Perhaps this definition of integrity also holds for Jesus' teaching on divorce. Broken relationships are not full of integrity or completeness, but perhaps there is need to reconsider who is blamed for what. Perhaps Jesus wants us to consider our own

prejudices regarding how people react to the failure of a relationship, or whether or not someone deserved to be cast out and made destitute. Women were always to blame when divorces happened in Jesus' time, but he turns that idea on its head and instead pushes a new way to think about integrity.

Perhaps integrity is not something that means we are as blameless as we think or as complete as we think. Perhaps the psalmist's cry against those with "evil devices" in their hands is as much an indictment of our failure to act, include, compromise, and listen as it is of those whose hands are covered in the blood of the innocent. Perhaps it is the case that we cry out against bombed hospitals or terrorized community colleges but we are not blameless. Perhaps, as Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas says, there are no innocent bystanders.

Perhaps integrity is not an individual activity—and it is an activity far more than it is an adjective—but perhaps it is a social activity. Those who have been cast out, those whose pain breaks language, they need to be woven together into a complete community. They are not those who ought to be cast aside; rather, Jesus seems to be telling us that they belong. **We** are not complete, **we** are not people of integrity until the destitute, the disenfranchised, and the longsuffering are brought near. Perhaps it is only then that we can persist in integrity.