

Sunday, February 12, 2017  
All Saints Episcopal Church  
San Leandro, California  
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A few years back there was a couple who were planning to get married. They decided to hold their wedding in Santa Barbara. I don't know how many of you have been there, but it's a beautiful place for a beautiful, fairly local, wedding escape. Along West Cabrillo Boulevard you will find Harbor View Inn, overlooking a half-mile long beach with a lovely peninsula that juts out into the harbor. They stayed in the Inn and found that peninsula to be a beautiful place for taking photos of the couple and the wedding party. The sandy beach, the Santa Barbara sun, the boats from the harbor in the background, back-dropped by the ocean. It was idyllic. While the couple was posing, back to the ocean, the photographer and a couple friends of bride and groom start to yell loudly, "Wave!" They looked at each other, shrugged, and figured, alright, so they waved back. And their friends yelled all the more loudly, "WAVE!" And they began to wave a little more exaggeratedly just as a giant wave crashed over the part of the peninsula they were standing on, soaking them from head to toe.

The reason I share this story is just a reminder that context is everything. A preacher I heard in seminary once said, "Scripture without context is always a pretext." This is why when preaching on the Gospel, often I will take you back in time, into the time and place of our Gospel writers.

Today's Gospel lessons, most plainly involve Jesus magnifying the law and showing us that what really matters is the disposition of our heart towards God and our neighbor. It's not enough to just not murder, our heart needs to be right towards our neighbor. It's not enough to just come to the altar, we need to be reconciled with our brothers and sisters who also come to the altar. It's not enough to avoid committing adultery, we are called not to covet each other like objects.

I want to hone in, however, on Jesus' comments on divorce, and this is where context becomes important. "I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." The shame in this culture would fall on the man for causing this situation.

We must remember the highly patriarchal system of Jesus' day. A woman was treated as a man's property. Her testimony bore no weight in Jewish law. Hebrew women have minimal property rights. She could inherit property, but male heirs always had precedence and even if she did inherit property her husband had certain rights to it. A woman's primary role was in the home, and it was there she led table prayers and festival candle lighting ceremonies. In the home, she had much more influence than outside the home.

In this culture, we see, women did not survive very easily unless they were linked to the patriarchal household, where they found their role and voice in the home. It was disastrous for a woman to be divorced, and so easy for a man to dismiss her. Seen in this light, Jesus' teaching that almost forbids divorce is markedly protective of women. He reiterates this teaching in Matthew 19 when the Pharisees confront him. Interestingly, immediately following his commentary on divorce in Matthew 19, the author writes, "Then little children were being

brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.'" The Kingdom belongs to such as Gideon, who today will be baptized into a recognition of the Kingdom of God as his inheritance.

Understood in his context, Jesus was in so many ways an egalitarian, challenging social structures and systems which devalued anyone—women, the handicap, the impoverished, and especially children, who were treated with so much less regard than in our day and age.

Alongside this teaching of his, which essentially protects women from their husbands' easy and flippant dismissal, Jesus turns to the children in their midst using the vulnerable child, who in that culture had no rights, as the model of Christian faith. Jesus' teachings confront systems of power and dominance, and a lift up the dignity and basic rights of those who were disfavored in his time. This is in many ways a fulfillment of the prophesy we heard when Jesus was still in his mother's womb: "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

Just as he brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, so may we continue in his footsteps, confronting power with justice and systems of domination with the liberating message of the Gospel. Just as he filled the hungry with good things and confronted the inequity of wealth, may we reflect on ways we are complicit with economic injustice, working instead on building up the Kingdom of God, which belong to the children. Perhaps Robert Fulghum was onto something, maybe inspired by Jesus' teaching, when he wrote the book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. He writes,

*ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sand pile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:*

*Share everything.*

*Play fair.*

*Don't hit people.*

*Put things back where you found them.*

*Clean up your own mess.*

*Don't take things that aren't yours.*

*Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.*

*Wash your hands before you eat.*

*Flush.*

*Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.*

*Live a balanced life - learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.*

*Take a nap every afternoon.*

*When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.*

*Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.*

*Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.*

*And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK.*

*Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.*

*Take any of those items and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to your family life or your work or your government or your world and it holds true and clear and firm. Think what a better world it would be if all - the whole world - had cookies and milk about three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had a basic policy to always put thing back where they found them and to clean up their own mess.*

*And it is still true, no matter how old you are - when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.*

This is a good model for what I will call Kingdom Living, how we are called to live in the Kingdom of God, which is both here and not yet. And what a Kingdom we have to build and inherit, along with our brother Gideon, whose rebirth in the Sacrament of Baptism we celebrate today.

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