

A Hug or a Contract Negotiation

A sermon on Mark 10: 2-16 by Nathan Nettleton, 3 October 2021

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Message

The Kingdom of God can only be accepted the way a child welcomes a hug, not the way lawyers accept a divorce settlement.

Sermon

Following a set cycle of Bible readings, as we do here, brings both joys and frustrations. The frustrations mostly have to do with how the readings are divided up. Sometimes it can be annoying that a reading is cut off where it is. As a preacher, I may want to make connections to what comes next, but someone somewhere has decided we will stop here. Of course, we don't have to obey, and sometimes I don't.

Sometimes though, it is more perplexing why they went on and didn't stop. Today's gospel reading is one of those. We began with the Pharisees trying to trap Jesus with a bit of a Catch 22 question about divorce laws. This results in Jesus making some very positive statements about the permanence of marriage and some consequent negative statements about divorcing your spouse and remarrying. These are very intimidating words for those of us like me who have been divorced and are remarried. This version in Mark's gospel doesn't even offer the exception that Matthew's version provides.

But then, all of a sudden, we are no longer talking about divorce, we are into the story of Jesus welcoming the children who are brought to him for blessing, and telling his disciples, who were trying to shoo the children away, that "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

You could be forgiven for thinking the lectionary compilers were nodding off after lunch when they left those two passages together. And having been at a few of the meetings where decisions about alterations to the lectionary are made, I can assure you that it is possible!

In truth though, as surprising as it might be that the lectionary compilers didn't split these two stories, the fact remains that the Apostle Mark put them together when he wrote his gospel. And generally Mark is quite deliberate in the way he relates one story to another, so perhaps there is a valuable truth to be discovered in the juxtaposition of these two stories.

Now when I went to the commentaries to see what the scholars had to say on it, to be honest, there wasn't much. About all they came up with was that it is natural for a point about children to follow from a point about marriage, but since the point about marriage was in the context of a dispute about divorce, it doesn't seem all that convincing. But the reason I'm telling you that the scholars didn't have much is to warn you that the connections I am making come purely out of my own reflections, and are not backed up by anyone much else that I know of. So make of them what you will.

But as I sat with the juxtaposition of these two stories, I began to see a link that I think might be quite helpful. Let me work backwards from the second story. The difficulty with what Jesus says about children in this gospel is that it is rather ambiguous. The construction of the sentence is such that it could quite plausibly mean any of three quite different things.

It could mean that you must receive the kingdom the way a child would receive it. Or that you must receive the kingdom the way you would receive a child. Or even that you must receive the kingdom while you are a child. And a good case can be made for each; even the last one. I'm not going to unpack that debate, but I'm going with the first one: receiving the kingdom the way a child does. You'll see why when I get back to the divorce comments.

The picture we get in this story is of parents coming to Jesus so that he might take the children in his arms and bless them. It is almost a Santa in the shopping centre type picture, a queue of kids with parents in tow, waiting to sit on the lap of the friendly bloke with the big beard. That might not be an altogether helpful image, but from both this passage and the other one we saw a couple of weeks ago, you certainly get the impression that children felt pretty good about being around Jesus. He seems to have been one of those people who was very good with kids, who made them feel safe and comfortable and valued. Someone who took them seriously and didn't talk down to them or dismiss them lightly.

When we're physically gathered for church activities, you'll notice that Ian too is always popular with our children here, and I think that one of the reasons is that when he chats with a child, he treats them with the same interest that he treats everyone else.

I think what we sometimes forget when we are interpreting this passage is that accepting the kingdom of God and accepting the person of Jesus are really one and the same thing. And the way children seemed to accept Jesus was that they wanted to climb into his lap for a hug. Most children love to have hugs from the people they love. And I reckon that the picture of a child running up to Jesus for a hug is more or less the image he is describing as the way we need to receive the kingdom of God. Just an uncomplicated, joyous, jump into the arms, hug.

Now what on earth could that have to do with the argument about divorce? Good question! But bear with me, because I think there is a connection, by way of a contrast. You see, what Jesus has to say about marriage and divorce here does not come up because he thought it would be a good time to talk about such things, but because he is being challenged with a curly question about interpretations of the religious laws as they relate to divorce.

These religious experts have codified a set of conditions and procedures by which a man could get rid of his wife and still stay in the good books so far as religious law was concerned. And so Jesus's words about marriage and divorce have actually not got much to do with questions about whether those who have had failed marriages can be allowed a second chance.

It is not the divorced and remarried he has got in his sights, it is those who approach religion as a kind of contract negotiation where you argue and bargain for wriggle room and loopholes and exemptions. It is those who think that if you can find an angle by which you can legally defend your callous and cynical actions, then God will be persuaded and keep you in the good books.

In the context of a failed marriage, there is all the difference in the world between, on the one hand, saying "I failed, my vows have been betrayed, this is all brokenness and sin and disaster, and I cast myself on the mercy of God and trust that in time, God will raise me up and give me another chance", and on the other hand saying "my marriage has ended but under the

terms laid down in Matthew chapter 19, I have legitimate grounds for divorce and God is obliged to honour that and allow me this course of action without blemishing my record.”

It is a bit like what is going on in the book of Job, from which we heard an extract earlier. The book of Job is full of wrong ideas about God and the way God deals with us, and most of the book sets out those various ideas in order to then declare them wrong by the end of the book. And while the bit we heard tonight is not one of the bits that is specifically refuted later on, it is nevertheless one of the kind of images that Jesus dismisses. People have often thought that human suffering is caused by God having arguments with the Satan and we are just collateral damage in their dispute. But Jesus is scathing about attempts to portray God as a callous bargainer who is just looking to win arguments and prove points. That’s not how God operates.

So in assembling these stories, Mark reinforces Jesus’s point with the saying about children. “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” You can’t bargain your way into the kingdom. You can’t quote chapter and verse to prove that there is no legal grounds to keep you out. You can’t receive the kingdom of God like a lawyer haggling out the terms of a divorce settlement. You can only receive the kingdom of God like a child running joyously for a hug from a loved one.

Which is also why the presence of children in our worship is so important. If you take what Jesus is saying here seriously, then you’ll begin to see that children in worship are not distractions from the message and the purpose of worship, but in fact they are bearers of the message. They embody the message. They are gifts from God who can demonstrate for us the spirit with which we all need to learn to engage in worship. So the next time you see a child run and jump joyously into someone’s lap, hear the words of Jesus, “Truly I tell you, that’s what it is all about. Until you can receive the kingdom of God like that, you’ve still got a long way to go!”