

Sermon

10.4.15

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The Garden Church

**Psalm 8**

8:1 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

8:2 Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

8:3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

8:4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

8:5 Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

8:6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

8:7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

8:8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

8:9 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

**Mark 10:2-16**

10:2 Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

10:3 He answered them, "What did Moses command you?"

10:4 They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her."

10:5 But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.

10:6 But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.'

10:7 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,

10:8 and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

10:9 Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

10:10 Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.

10:11 He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her;

10:12 and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

10:13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.

10:14 But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

10:15 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

10:16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

This Sunday there are just too many things going on in the liturgical calendar—According to many traditions, today is the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals, merchants, and ecology. Saint Francis is the one that we see images of with the birds and the animals flocking to him; he's the statue that we put in our gardens (we need to find one for our garden) to remind us of the connection between a life of faith and a love of the natural world. Saint Francis is also the saint who's name the current Pope took on, along with much of his character and emphasis on caring for the earth and for the vulnerable and those on the edges of society.

Today is also World Communion Day, a day when many Christian denominations across the world celebrate communion, or Eucharist in solidarity with each other, remembering that we're all part of one church, the Lord's loving presence on earth, and that we can share together around one table, from all our different perspectives and traditions.

And then, the lectionary gives us the passage from the gospel of Mark, that most preachers do their hardest to avoid, because it doesn't get much messier than when we bring up God, the Bible, gender, and divorce.

And then we have another horrible shooting that led to nine deaths in Roseburg, Oregon' and our country yet again wrestling with our culture of families and communities being ripped apart when people die from gun violence. And then we separate and divide as we try to figure out how to even talk about guns and violence when we vehemently disagree with those we love.

So. Really, this would have been a good Sunday as a preacher to just avoid—to slip out, to be out of town for—but here I am. Here we are.

Last Sunday however, I was not here with you, as I was in Colorado for medical treatment, required every six months for the ongoing recovery for a severe case of Lyme Disease I encountered a number of years ago. My week was spent doing two rounds of treatment and then a number of days recovering flat out on the couch afterwards.

Last Sunday was the first day that I felt like maybe I could go somewhere, but I didn't feel up for social and emotional energy of going to worship at my former congregation—a whole bunch of people who love me, and who I love, who would want to visit and catch up.

But I couldn't stand the idea of lying on the couch another day, so I borrowed a friend's car and drove the 20 minutes to a little town that is one of my favorite spots at the base of the Rockies, to see what it's like to spend a Sunday the way much of society does—at the coffee shop and then being outdoors in the mountains.

It was lovely and peaceful and entertaining at the adorable little coffee shop, but the closer it got to 11 am, the stronger I felt the draw to the little community church across the street, with its white square walls and big honey-colored wooden doors. I was drawn to the church in the same way I'd been drawn up to the mountains that morning, being pulled by the possibility of catching a glimpse of the brilliant orange swatches of aspen trees, lightening up the pine-covered Rockies.

Now you can all shake your heads at me. Yes, on the one Sunday in months that I didn't have to go to church, I went.

I waited until right at 11 to walk into the church, to insure minimal potential chit-chat, and was greeted by a well dressed older woman at the front door, who handed me a bulletin, smiled, and then, I dare to project, looked somewhat disapprovingly at my comfy faded jeans, black sleeveless tank top, and the cup of chai that I was not going to be putting down before walking into their nicely carpeted sanctuary, thank you very much.

I found within that space what you might expect from a small local church in a small town. Pews, semi-filled with people, mostly over the age of sixty with a perky former elementary school music leader exhorting us to engage the hand motions of “He's got the whole world in his hands” and singing *all* the verses of the old hymns.

Then the guest minister for the day got up and introduced herself, self-proclaimed grandmother, and preacher.

The passage she was working with was from the book of Ephesians, the text about how the body of Christ, which she and many others interpreted as “the church” is made up of many different parts, different members, and how everyone has their gifts. But somehow as she was preaching about different people, having different gifts, rather than feeling a part of something bigger, being part of it—I began to feel separate, judged even as I sat as a visitor in comfy jeans that didn’t quite fit in with the jackets and skirts, having just popped over from the Sunday morning coffee temple across the street on my way to worship God in the mountains.

I started to notice my spine stiffening as I heard, which is not necessarily what was being preached, a sermon that turned from an expansive observation of the way we can all be part of something bigger, to what felt to me as a lecture on the rules of how to be a church or not be church. How to follow God or not. The ways to behave or not to behave. That being people of faith is about following the rules...because, well, God said so. And that probably wearing jeans to church and defiantly taking my cup of chai into the sanctuary would be on the list of “no”s, whether I was an undercover pastor on my day off or not.

I snuck out during the last hymn and the pastor’s husband who was sitting on the other end of the last pew, made some comment of “behave yourself” and clinched my self-righteous indignation about how judgmental this church was and how “no wonder it was only half-full” and no young people were there and I could pat myself on the back that I wasn’t a pastor of **that** kind of church.

### **Busted.**

Here I was separating myself from this world communion, divorcing myself from relationship with other people because of my reaction to what I experienced as confining and judgmental thinking, led me to jump on the band-wagon and judge right back. And I got so caught up in my self-righteous critique of church, that I missed Jesus’ call for my own repentance, calling out my ego and judgment, wanting to make one way of doing church and preaching scriptures *right* and another *wrong* and of course, wanting mine to me on the *right* side.

As I was driving up through the winding roads on a solo pilgrimage to find those glowing aspens trees, I felt my body start to soften and my breath come back to a place of ease...and some humility return to my being.

I thought about our scriptures for this week and how much I dreaded peaching on them. And I thought about how when I've heard them preached—within the frame of “one right way” and “one wrong way.” “Married people—good; divorced people—bad.” Preached in frames where the church and the scriptures and God are all about the rules and the fences that separate and divide us from each other and make it so we can assure ourselves of our superiority and rightness. Or when I use them in a way to cover up my own vulnerability.

And I thought about these texts on gender and marriage and divorce and how much pain they've caused and how easy it is to hear them and use them for judgment and division, and how much I would really like to avoid them, skip right over to a nice text about Jesus feeding people or something.

As a drove, though, I knew, of course, that we have to wrestle with this text together, because it's in that wrestling and confronting the judgment and separation in ourselves that God works with us, changes us, softens our hearts. That this text on marriage and divorce, like the text from Ephesians—is offering us the truth that we're all part of one body that is the church, that we're all created for wholeness and union, that Jesus is not about pouring lemon juice in our open wounds and judging us in our vulnerable weak places. Jesus is calling out the place where we have separated ourselves from each other and are looking for ways to use God and scripture to reinforce our sense of superiority and rightness. What's right, what's wrong, who's in, who's out?

It seems that the Pharisees in our story today were primarily concerned with the “Who's right?” and “Who's wrong?” question, to the point that our text says, “Some Pharisees approached Jesus and, *as a test* asked, *‘Is it permissible for husbands to divorce wives?’*”

The great temptation of this text is to turn Jesus' teaching into a new "law" about divorce and remarriage. Such a move, in fact runs directly counter to Jesus' underlying theological emphases. Jesus seeks to move beyond a legalistic approach to questions of divorce (the approach of his adversaries) toward a theological affirmation that God created human beings as part of an integral whole, that we are meant for each other and meant for connection and conjunction together, connection and wholeness within relationships, within ourselves, with the created world and with our creator.

Because God's kingdom holds everything. It holds the divorced woman with an infant child, it holds the heartbroken man who lost his regular contact with his children, it holds those who are single on purpose and those for whom it is a daily heartbreak to be alone. God's kingdom holds the couples who have been married for fifty years, the glowing couple that got married last week and those who are finally allowed to legally marry the one they love. God's kingdom includes the animals and the plants, the waters and the air. The way of God's kingdom is not interested in division and superiority, stroking my ego to make sure that I'm right and come out on top. God's kingdom is where the first are last and the last are first and the little children—the least of these—are brought forward, much to the chagrin of the disciples, and are taken up in Jesus' lap and blessed. As Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

So here on World Communion day, we come around the table thinking of our connection with people across the world as we put bread in our mouths and remember our shared humanity. As we share the cup, we are humbled, and the lines between *us* and *them* become blurry. And we can't quite see clearly any more how it was that we were so sure that our desire to divide, to divorce ourselves from the family of God, to be sure that we're not one of "those kinds of people" or part of "that church." We remember that we are all one.

And here on Feast of Saint Francis we sit outside in the natural world and we remember that we are part of this bigger whole of creation and we are not separate from the animals and the ground, the water and the plants. We gather together in the spirit of children, of humanity, of Saint Francis and in communion together. I'd like to end by sharing a prayer

attributed to Saint Francis, and I invite you as I read it to focus on these words and images, and pray it in your own hearts and spirits with me.

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is error, the truth;  
Where there is doubt, the faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,  
Grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled, as to console;  
To be understood, as to understand;  
To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.