

Sometimes we can forget there is a lot more to the Bible than words of comfort. Sometimes, like today's readings, when we look at passages of Scripture, we have a difficult time seeing anything that looks like Good News. This can make us uncomfortable and distract us from the Good News that really is there. There are many reasons for this distraction. Most often I wonder if it is because we can be tempted to look at the Bible for a direct correlation to our individual lives. Instead of seeing Scripture as an ancient account of how God made the world and is part of the world and loves the world and everyone in it and redeems the world, we approach it as just another consumable, something that is supposed to give us what we want whether it is comfort, justification for our actions or feelings, or validation that we are right and someone else is wrong. In truth, I believe Scriptures are much deeper, and richer than anything we consume for entertainment or validation. The Bible isn't always going to be easy to digest. And I believe that is a good thing because life itself is deep and complex, often messy, and it makes sense to me that for Scriptures to stand the test of time, they need to be just as complex.

Several preachers and commentators have written that when we go looking for ourselves in the Bible, we tend to identify with whomever we believe is the hero of the story: like Esther or Peter or Mary or Job. One of the troubles with that approach is when we read a passage like today's Gospel, we can get distracted thinking about our personal experiences or feelings about marriage, divorce, or children. This can distract us.

So, let's take a step back and acknowledge whatever distraction we might have, and then try setting those distractions aside so we can take another look. It's a passage that begins not with Jesus but with Pharisees, religious leaders of the era. They were supported by their own system, like most leaders of any institution, religious or otherwise. They went to Jesus with a test. Not a midterm or a final exam. They didn't surprise him with a pop quiz to see if Jesus was skilled at practical application. This was a different kind of test. They were trying to trick him into saying something that would either make him look bad or expose him for being another false messiah. Or maybe they were looking for a certain kind of messiah.

That might be where some folks could see themselves. It is not uncommon to put God to the test. I hear it all the time. "If God is so loving," the test always starts when I am listening to someone, "then why does God allow..." And you can fill in the blank. Usually, the specifics relate to the suffering or sorrow or anger the person is feeling.

And we don't need to judge people for testing God this way. They are in good company. Sometimes people who have contributed good things to religion have gone through times of testing. One example that comes to mind is C. S. Lewis, an influential writer and whose books like *Mere Christianity* and the *Narnia Chronicles* are among people's favorites even today because they have helped them deepen their faith. However, Clive Staples Lewis, who preferred to be called Jack, was not a wise Christian all his life. He often struggled with tenets of faith. He was even an atheist for part of his life because God failed to pass his test. When Lewis was a young boy about ten years old, his mother was diagnosed with cancer, which at the time pretty much always meant the person with cancer was going to die. Lewis loved his mother and prayed and prayed and prayed to God to spare her life. He begged God and tried to bargain with God, promising to be a good boy if God let his mother live.

When his mother died, Lewis declared God did not exist because God had not done what he had asked in prayer. As he grew older and became an academic, C.S. Lewis became a skilled speaker and debater who won academic debates on the existence of God, by arrogantly speaking against it.

Then one day, as he described in his book *Surprised by Joy*, God had had enough of this and simply told him God existed. Lewis wrote it was quite a simple surprise. There was no dramatic experience. It happened while he was going with his brother to the zoo, a supposedly short drive. Lewis wrote when they started, he didn't believe in God. When they reached their destination, he had realized God existed whether he believed in God or not. This realization was not due to his own intelligence, it was simply God speaking to him. Thus began a new relationship with God. One that was messy at times; because Lewis wasn't afraid to wrestle with God over his own prejudices, but when he did, Lewis usually grew. All because he eventually realized God is much bigger than a test of human belief.

When the Pharisees tested Jesus, they weren't asking about divorce. They weren't asking about marriage. They were asking about the law. Is it lawful? they asked. And Jesus replied there was a law, but it existed for a deeper reason. The same reason why God became incarnate through Jesus: because of humanity's hardness of heart.

Hardness of heart is a Biblical phrase that goes back to the book Exodus, when the Israelites wanted freedom from the oppression of slavery in Egypt, but Pharaoh refused to let them go, even when Moses said it was God's will. The story starts by saying Pharaoh hardened his heart and wouldn't let them go. This hard heart was Pharaoh saying he was the boss of his country, not the God of the Israelites. In a way, Pharaoh was testing God, saying he was going to do what he was going to do, because his will was stronger than God's. That's when the plagues came into the story. I'm sure you remember them either from the Bible or the movies *The Ten Commandments* or the *Prince of Egypt*. Pharaoh was pretty darn stubborn. Not walking sticks turning to snakes, not a plague of frogs, or skin disease, or water turning to blood could shake his conviction. He was that strong. So strong that at one point in the story, it says God hardened Pharaoh's heart; perhaps to show God was going to do whatever it would take to convince God's people there is only one God, and it is not Pharaoh. In this story we learn hard heartedness is a condition of turning against God; being unwilling or unable to attune beliefs, actions, words, and cares to those of God. It's another way to talk about sin, not just individual sin but as a condition affecting all people.

This means when Jesus answered the Pharisees' question about the law, his answer wasn't about the law, it was the reason for the law. The hardness of heart that pervaded humanity like a plague, a chronic illness resulting in humanity's disregard for God, each other, and God's intention for humanity. If we go back to the beginning, to Genesis, we see that God created people for each other so we wouldn't be alone. Today we can get distracted by the language and fret that not every gender is represented when we read God created men and women and intended marriage to be one man and one woman coming together to make one flesh. We mistake this for being about sex. But the word used in the original language could also be translated body, as in group, as in the Body of Christ, like when we refer to Christianity.

Marriage was intended for two people to form a body, a unit, to face the world in all its complexities together. However, that is not how marriage has always been practiced, and throughout history it has taken many forms. From a way to merge family properties or kingdoms, for families to gain wealth or status or security, or to add labor to a production force, many historians note only recently has marriage been about love and romance. In Jesus' day, wives were to be producers of heirs and managers of households like we heard in a reading from Proverbs a few weeks ago. Husbands were supposed to provide status for the family.

When anyone failed to live into these expectations, even if it was for something minor like burning food or something beyond their control like becoming ill, the law stated divorce was justified. And all anyone had to do was provide a document stating they were released from marriage. In a society where women did not have the rights like we do in modern society, being released from marriage meant they were out on their own without means of supporting themselves. Unless their families took them back, they were homeless.

When it came to children, they were not valued for their individualism or potential like our modern society, but for what they could provide for the family by helping with labor to produce everything from food to clothing, to care for livestock. There was a high mortality rate for children in Jesus' day, and there still is in some places today, so, children had no rights and did not participate in things like religious rituals until they reached adulthood. I'm not saying children weren't loved by their families, but they were treated differently than we treat them today.

Which is why when people brought their children to Jesus in today's Gospel the disciples responded by speaking sternly and sending them away.

Most of what we read in today's Gospel is evidence of hard-heartedness. Today we might not express hard-heartedness the same way, but it is still around. When we demonize people for being different, or voting different, or having different religion, or gender, or economic status, or race. When we shame people because it makes us feel better about ourselves. Look at any newspaper or social media outlet and you will see evidence that humanity hasn't gotten over hard heartedness. Too often people would rather throw away another person when they no longer have a use for them, or because they are different, or differently abled, or ill.

So, where is the Good News in today's Gospel? It is where it always is. In Jesus who came that we might have life through him; his resurrection life is the salve, the balm, the medicine for humanity's condition of hard heartedness. Which means when we look at something like divorce, we do so through the lens of resurrection life, which is not afraid to acknowledge death. Sometimes people die, and sometimes marriages, sometimes programs, sometimes purposes change, like the former rectory that we will be selling this week. It's wrong to use scripture to keep people trapped in unhealthy and harmful situations, like today's Gospel has unfortunately been used. Resurrection life teaches us there is life on the other side of suffering loss and death. Like C.S. Lewis discovered, sometimes resurrection life isn't a grand, sweeping change. Most often it is something that is simple, that is difficult to describe or explain but is still very real.

That may be why our Gospel passage for today ends with something as simple as Jesus welcoming children, embracing them, and blessing them. Maybe also playing with them. Maybe laughing with them. Not in a display of preciousness, but in genuine welcome, to show us God really does love and welcome all, even those we think it justifiable to exclude because they can't sit still or be perfectly quiet or think what we want them to think. In what might have been a messy, giggly, tangled embrace of children, Jesus created a little piece of God's Kingdom here on earth, one where the only thing there wasn't room for was hardness of heart. And that is some much needed Good News that can stand the test of this or any time.