

Proper 22, Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B – October 6, 2024

“We are All God’s Children”

The Rev. Anne Hartley

ST. PAUL’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH VERGENNES, VERMONT

Genesis 2:18-24 | Psalm 8 | Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12 | Mark 10:2-16

Fr. Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest who served as pastor of the poorest Catholic parish in Los Angeles in the late 80s, early 90s. As gang-related killings peaked, Fr. Greg set up Homeboy Industries. He mobilized the community to provide job training, remove tattoos, pay for rehab, offer counseling and other services. Now Homeboy Industries is the largest gang intervention, rehabilitation, and re-entry program in the world. It gives gang members a place to belong, a place of kinship and hope. It is how I envision God’s kingdom here on earth.

So, what does this radical intervention of kinship and hope look like? Let’s put a face on it. Here’s an excerpt from Fr. Greg’s most recent memoir, The Whole Language.

“It’s the last day before our extended Christmas break. Winding down is in the air. I’m talking to a homie in my office and I hear, ‘STORY TIME!’ hollered from the reception area. I try to stay focused on the guy in front of me as I watch the swirl of homies and homegirls place chairs in a circle. Gabriel, one of our Navigators, has convened the bunch. He came to us as a trainee, with certificates in gangbanging, prison time, wild addiction, and general knucklehead-osity. The day he stepped into our place, he was greeted by Robert Juarez, who knew him and his reputation well.

‘What are you doing here?’ Robert asked him.

‘I’ve come to change my life.’ Robert stared at him.

‘No, really...what are you doing here?’

Gabriel practically runs the place now.

‘STORY TIME!’ he yells again, and thirty gang members, felons, and former drug addicts silently sit in a circle. He’s purloined a copy of Madeline and the Gypsies from our Take a Book/Leave a Book shelf. Someone’s young daughter sits next to him while he reads loudly from the book. When he completes the page, the girl holds the book up so that this rapt audience can see the illustrations. No one speaks and their eyes simply move from Gabriel to the girl, in the kind of attention that is generally hard to gather.

Gabriel was the train conductor and every man and woman in that circle was taking a return trip to the childhood denied them. Strange as it may seem, in that circle they found their agency, and a power to resist. It was an exhibition of cultural capital, heightened emotional resources, and creative energy not available before. No longer trapped, they find the nobility in belonging. They aren’t ridding themselves of anything but bringing their authentic selves into the light.”

We talk a lot about inclusion these days. At church, inclusion gets us in the door, a seat on a pew, and a handshake at the peace. Belonging happens when we are living in kinship with everyone around us everywhere, when we accept and love ourselves and each other as our Creator loves us.

In the Gospel according to Mark, Jewish religious leaders asked several questions. Each time Jesus answered, he transcended the specific issue to address the heart of the question: What does it mean to belong?

When the Pharisees asked: should we pay taxes to the emperor? (Mark 12:14), they wanted to know, do we belong to the Jewish community or do we belong to the Roman Empire?

The Sadducees asked Jesus: If a woman successively marries seven brothers, whose wife will she be in heaven? (Mark 12:23) The Pharisees wanted to know to which brother the wife belonged.

The question in today’s Gospel was about divorce. The

Pharisees asked Jesus: Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife,” as though testing Jesus’ interpretation of the law or the authority behind it. Jesus asked the Pharisees what Moses had commanded. The ten commandments that God gave to Moses commanded them not to commit adultery. The Pharisees added that Moses allowed men to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce a wife. Jesus replied that that was because of men’s hardness of heart, not because God commanded it.

Jesus heard the Pharisees’ question this way: Do men have the right to sever belonging? No, Jesus answered, and this applies to men and women equally. Man and woman were created to be together, not to be separated.

The Pharisees asked Jesus his opinion about laws written by men. To Jesus, only God’s laws and commandments matter. God created us to be companions, to be united in love for each other and our Creator. We are not supposed to divorce, nor are we supposed to live in loveless relationships that are destructive. We are supposed to live in love, but what happens when people fall short?

It is tempting to read our own life stories into biblical narratives. In this case, we have to be careful not to read our own stories into the narratives of the Pharisees. We will be judged by God’s law, and our one true God is faithful. God longs for us to be in right relationship with God and each other.

A few days ago, my friend Naomi, a 5th year rabbinical student, wrote about a verse in Psalm 81, “Blow the horn on the new moon, on the full moon for our festival day.” This verse ushers in the High Holiday, Rosh Hashanah, the head of the year when our Jewish neighbors celebrate the birth of the universe and the creation of Adam and Eve. New moon and full moon are in some ways opposites. The new moon is nearly invisible; the full moon blindingly bright. The psalmist’s reflection of the High Holidays asks us, in Naomi’s words, “to bring hidden things to the surface so we can reckon with them as we need to; taking our new moons and filling

them with the deeds and thoughts we wish we could cover up.” This is not our season of self-examination and atonement. For Christians, that happens in Advent and especially in Lent, but the Jewish observance of the new year reminds us that there is nothing we do is final. Like the loving, merciful father who welcomes the prodigal son home with open arms, not demanding forgiveness, God wants us to return, to be united, not separated.

Today’s Gospel reading ends with Jesus telling his disciples to let the children come to him, not to stop them, because the kingdom of God belongs to them. “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” Jesus took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:14-15)

This is the answer to all of the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ questions. The kingdom of God belongs to anyone else who is open and willing to receive it. We don’t have to learn the law or interpret it correctly or even obey all of the commandments to belong. All we have to do is take a seat in the circle and return to our childhood. “In an old house in Paris that was covered with vines, lived twelve little girls in two straight lines. The smallest one was Madeline.”

How does every Madeline story end? “And that’s all there is. There isn’t any more.”