

Last weekend, as I sat down to work on this reflection in my chilly, rather dark kitchen, it took me awhile to realize it was actually a gorgeous afternoon outside and it would be a sin to miss it! So I headed out to a small and beautiful beach by the lake. It was one of those glorious days in late September when the sun is warm and golden and the leaves rustle at your feet as you walk on the sidewalk.

Sitting in front of the lake that day, there were beams of sunlight twinkling like bright stars on the water. An older couple sat in their lawn chairs some distance in front of me talking. Children's voices could be heard, laughing and playing on the playground nearby. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see in the distance, the silhouette of a father holding his daughter's hand, as they were walking out of the water. The little girl was jumping up and down and dancing in the water as he slowly and steadily guided her towards the shore.

Today's gospel reading has two sections which, at first glance, seem completely unrelated to each other. I read where some say the part about Jesus and the children was put at the end of the gospel for clergy who don't want to have to talk about marriage and divorce! But as is often the case, it becomes clear that there is a deeper meaning to the placement of these two scenes.

The first section focuses on the Pharisees trying to test Jesus about the laws for divorce. There is a cultural context here regarding the plight of divorced women, living in a patriarchal culture, that can help shed light on Jesus's response. But Jesus doesn't seem to want to talk much about the controversial law of that time. Instead, he focuses on eternal truths found within the Torah.

He focuses less on separation and more on union. He speaks of our creation story, of how two are meant to join together and become one in a sacred partnership.

In reflecting on the reading from Genesis and the words of Jesus together today, we might hear the message that since the dawn of creation, God doesn't want us to be alone. We are designed by God to be in relationship with each other and to help each other. Whether that is with a good friend, a partner or spouse, a family by birth or by choice, a community or a parent and child.

But we also know that relationships are challenging in the best of circumstances. There is “hardness of heart” as Jesus said. We see that in ourselves and we can see how that can become magnified and distorted in our world today, causing so much suffering. And so if we ask the question, what teachings can help us to reach beyond our small self – our pride, our fear, our judgments about how others should be, so that we can get along with those who are different from us and also those in need of care, because they are our community too?

Jesus said **“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, will never enter it.”**

When Jesus welcomes the little children to come to him, whom the disciples were quick to turn away, perhaps he is teaching us something about humility, vulnerability, openness, wonder and trust.\* At that time in Jewish culture, children had no social standing and Jesus's actions directly challenge that norm. Perhaps he is telling us that children have much to teach us, and that these are the qualities that, with God's help, can transform our relationships. Perhaps he is showing us that this is the way to our connection with God, each other and ourselves.

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In closing today, I want to share a bit about my journey in discipleship at All Saints Church. When I first came here, several years ago now, I felt the stirring of new life, like a little green shoot growing inside me. It was a joy to be here - and it still is! I wanted to serve and I have found different ways to do that. Currently, contemplating the readings and sharing these reflections here is teaching me so much spiritually. It is like a ripple effect, that what I experience here reverberates in my life and relationships in countless ways. And I am so grateful to all of you and this life-giving community!

*\*This idea came from an online reflection on this gospel titled "How's Your Heart?" by Matthew Root.*