

Lectionary 27 Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year B 2021
October 3, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There are limits in human relationships—there's only so much we'll take, only so much we'll give, only so many arguments we're willing to have, only so much we're willing to trust, only so many times we're willing to be betrayed. There's a limited amount of energy, and a limited amount of time, and countless demands for us to attend to in our various relationships. In many cases, our relationships are broken or ignored or taken for granted, and these relationships are in need of attention.

Now, given our gospel reading for today, you might assume I'm talking specifically about the marriage relationship. But this is true of all of our relationships. Our relationships with the people around us and with people all over the world are in need of restoration. A few years ago, Bishop Satterlee provided an interpretation of this reading for today's world, saying that we've all become divorced from one another—not in the sense of marriage, but in the way that all of our relationships experience brokenness and strain, and risk being ignored or discarded.

So many people expend all their energy trying to be successful or get ahead at work, to the point that they have nothing left for their family. It used to be the case that “children were to be seen and not heard,” especially during family dinners. At least one reason often given for this was because fathers had had a long day at work, and they needed a nice, quiet meal to relax and decompress. Another reason might be that it was the only opportunity for adults to have time and conversation together, and children weren't as high a priority. But this means that parents—especially those who spent most of their day at work—had to find other time and ways to build relationships with their children, or these relationships suffered.

And especially during the pandemic, it has been difficult to maintain our relationships with those outside our household. With various and changing travel restrictions, we've been unable to travel to see family and friends. We've struggled to stay in touch with those who we would normally see on a regular basis. And we've had to put real time and effort into reaching out and staying connected with those for whom the relationship came about naturally and freely before. But these relationships are important. They're part of our personal identity, they support our emotional wellbeing, and they help us maintain our connection to the world around us.

But this focus on community and relationships goes against what the world teaches us. Individualism is at the heart of our culture. We are taught over and over that we have to look out for ourselves and we have to make sure to take care of ourselves first. It's myself vs. the rest of the world, and we have to make sure that we come out on top. We are taught that if we rely on other people for support or ask for help, then we are weak, or incapable, or failures. Our culture tells us that we *should* divorce ourselves from other people so that we can throw ourselves into our work, make tons of money and get ahead.

And even more, when it comes to undesirable people, or those our society has deemed worthless, or anyone who can't offer us what we're looking for, our culture says they're not worth our time, our money, our resources, or our efforts. This unfair characterization has been made against children, the elderly, women, the poor, hungry and homeless, people of color, refugees and immigrants, people who suffer from physical or mental disabilities, those who are ill, those who are less educated, and many others. Any time we can characterize ourselves as better than someone else, our culture tells us that we are more successful and more valuable than them, and we have no need for them.

And even the disciples are influenced by this culture. In the first century, children were seen as weak and worthless, as property of their father, with no value until they were married or became adults and were able to work. In fact, fathers had the right under Roman law to disown

and discard any child born to him or his household. So, in our Gospel reading, when people kept bringing children to Jesus, the disciples felt the need to stop them. The disciples believed that Jesus didn't have time for the worthless and weakest members of society; Jesus had serious work to do, and these little ones with no status or value needed to get out of the way.

But Jesus has a different message for his disciples and for us. When Jesus sees his disciples trying to make the children leave, Jesus gets angry and tells his disciples, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." In other words, Jesus tells his disciples that the kingdom of God belongs to the weakest and least valued people in the world, and that Jesus is called to care for them just as much—if not more—than he called to care for the rest of the world.

We see in this passage that even though society tells us that the weak and vulnerable have no value, this is not the case with God. With God, even the youngest, the weakest, the lowest status, and all least valuable members of society are worthy of respect and welcome and love. The kingdom of God is for *all* of God's people, not just those who have lived a successful life. This means that there is space for each one of us in God's family. Even when our relationships have limits, there are no limits with God. God values and cherishes each one of us, and God takes the time to be in relationship with all the people of the world. God has enough love for all people throughout creation.

God has created us not to live for ourselves alone, but to live in relationship with one another, our community, and our world. We hear this not only in our Gospel reading, but also in our reading from Genesis. We were not created to live alone—we need community and relationships with other people. It is not a sign of weakness to serve one another, to care for one another, or to ask for help when we need it. In these moments, we are simply calling upon and participating in the community that God has created for us.

And so, in our Gospel reading, Jesus calls us to live in community with all the people that God has sent into our lives, and Jesus sets before us an example of what this community looks like. Jesus challenges us to be generous with our time, so that we can build relationships especially with those who have been rejected by society, those whom society says are worthless. God has created us as people meant to be in relationship with one another. And as we live in loving relationship with our community and world, God's love is shared and made known in all of God's creation. Thanks be to God. Amen.