

LIFE STYLE – A Tender Heart in a Hard World

World Communion Sunday casts a vision of a world in which all of God's children live together in peace, but we know we have work to do to turn that vision into a reality. That's why we collect the Peacemaking Offering on World Communion Sunday – to turn that vision into a reality.

Programs to support the victims of domestic violence are one of the emphases of this year's campaign; our work with Family Promise, Berks Women in Crisis, and Opportunity House (the only homeless shelter with 2nd shift child care) are ways that we support victims of domestic violence. As you consider what you will give, know that both Opportunity House and Berks Women in Crisis receive funding from the state and are no doubt challenged by the current budget impasse.

A professor of pastoral care once said, "Marriages are supposed to be a match made in heaven, but some seem to be born in hell."

We've also heard the stories of women who were being abused being told by their pastor that divorce is a sin so they should stay in the marriage and make the best of it.

*Chances are, those pastors will quote, Mark 10:9 (NRSV) ⁹ **Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.**" Mark 10:11–12 (NRSV) ¹¹ ... **"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."***

Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters look to this text as a reason to deny access to the sacrament of communion to people who divorce.

So what do we make of this? It seems like Jesus has painted himself (and us) into a hardline, hard hearted corner.

We do what Jesus does in this passage; we have a Life Style that maintains a tender heart in a hard world.

*One of the dangers in interpreting Scripture is to focus on a particular text without considering its context; thus, we focus on the first part of our lesson about marriage without considering the second part where the disciples try to keep parents from bringing their children to Jesus, Mark 10:14–16 (NRSV) 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. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."** ¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.*

The world was deeply moved by images of Pope Francis doing the same thing last weekend. We saw that welcome and that blessing and we said, "Yes, that's what following Jesus is all about."

LIFE STYLE – A Tender Heart in a Hard World – page 2

So we have a curious contrast between the two halves of our text; we have a command of God that is high and hard and uncompromising; and, we have a core teaching of Jesus (“Truly I tell you” = this is a core teaching) that we must receive the kingdom of God as a little child.

This curious contrast is our invitation to keep a tender heart in a hard world.

The vows we make on our wedding day foreshadow what is to come as husband and wife venture forth into a hard world: “I ___ take you ___ to be my husband/wife and I promise before God and these witnesses to be your loving and faithful husband/wife in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health; as long as we both shall live.”

No wonder my professor of preaching, Betty Achtemeier, called marriage “a union of two forgivers.”

Marriage is hard. Life is hard. We need constant grace and mercy from one another for a marriage to work, because in a marriage two children of God who are broken and sinful commit to keeping a holy, sacred covenant with one another and with God. We make a sacred promise to be an image of the triune God in this world; Father and Son united in a bond of love who is the Holy Spirit just as husband and wife are joined in a bond of love that makes them “one flesh.”

Honoring that promise knocks me off my high horse. It reveals to me the ways that I have sinned and fallen short of the glory God. I need God’s forgiveness and my wife’s. I need God’s mercy and my wife’s. I need God’s grace and my wife’s. I don’t deserve any of it, but oh how I need it.

And the amazing thing, the thing that keeps my heart tender, is that I receive forgiveness, mercy, and grace from God and from Janice. On this Peacemaking Sunday, I rejoice and gives thanks because I have been given peace.

What have you received? What have you given? What is your life style? If you are married and it’s not easy, keep your heart tender. It’s so easy to see how we’ve been wronged; can we also see how we’ve done wrong; how we’ve contributed to the problem? If you are in an abusive relationship, the covenant has been broken; the promise has not been kept. God does not expect us to keep a promise that has been broken. Marriage is a two way street; it’s not “my way or else”. Know that divorce will not keep God from welcoming and blessing you. Divorce will not keep us from welcoming and blessing you.

Today is World Communion Sunday; today we commit ourselves to being peacemakers with tender hearts in a world. So today, to one and all we say: Come; the table is set. Your place is prepared. You are welcome to receive communion. You are welcome to receive Jesus Christ today. You are welcome to be blessed.

Take this gift to heart; share it with those in your life. Commit yourself with all the fear and trembling you knew on your wedding day to a life style that keeps a tender heart in a hard world. Amen.