

Year B

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

World Communion Sunday and Neighbors in Need

Genesis 2:18-24

Mark 10:2-16

Genesis 2:18-24

18 Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' ¹⁹So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said,

'This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.'

²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Mark 10:2-16

2 Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' ³He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' ⁴They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' ⁵But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." ⁷"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

10 Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

Jesus Blesses Little Children

13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Bone of My Bone and Flesh of My Flesh

Church, my heart is aggrieved with the weight of the stories that have come pouring out of women's bodies these last weeks in response to the fight over Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court and Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's assertion that he sexually assaulted her in high school. The country is divided. The political parties are grandstanding. Anger and pain are tangible, thick ropes in the air between us.

And meanwhile, the fight over what is true, what is right, and what is just rages over the grief of those who carry trauma in their bodies and those who love them.

The things we carry.

The reading from Genesis is the second of two creation stories in the Bible. It is one of the foundational stories that informs our society. Woman formed from man's body to be his companion and helper.

'This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.'

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.¹

Jesus teaches on this scripture in Mark, saying:

But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'²

Look, I have a few minutes to address a myriad of things, so let's just cut to the chase:

The Bible is an ancient text that is informed by the societies of its times. It did not conceive in any way of modern understandings of gender or relationships. So the gender binary of male/female is dominant in the text. And Jesus' teaching on divorce is clear and unequivocal,

¹ Genesis 2:23-24

² Mark 10:6-12

though the emphasis is on remarriage more so than divorce.³ “In Jewish law, unlike Roman law, a wife could not be the offended party in adultery and could not divorce her husband; only husbands had those prerogatives.”⁴

Modern readers must then understand the patriarchal case of ancient society as it is reflected in the biblical narratives. We should also be aware of the many ways in which women act to subvert patriarchal authority, sometimes in ways that determine the outcome of ancestral history and of the divine promises. Finally, readers today should understand the structural differences between ancient and modern societies and be careful about using ancient social norms as models for modern ethics.⁵

And yet, these texts have led to subjugation and erasure of rights in our society and many others across centuries.

The things we carry.

But we are called to be one in Christ. We are called to partnership across gender, race, class, ethnicity, and any difference humans can imagine. This is World Communion Sunday. This is also the day we take the UCC Neighbors in Need (NIN) Offering; one-third going to Native Americans ministries, and the other two-thirds to UCC Justice and Witness Ministries for social justice, advocacy, and direct-service projects. It is a day where we take a collection for the most marginalized in our society.

With marginalization often comes trauma. But one need not be marginalized to carry trauma. So many of us do. This week I’ve been marinating on what it would be like if we allowed everyone, all genders, to express their traumas and to be held in the light, wounds and all, and be told that we are loved. This doesn’t mean that this is a moment that we shouldn’t be especially vigilant about the treatment of women, queer, and trans folks who are the most likely to be violated. But so much of what I see is people acting out of fear—out of their own feelings of powerlessness and helplessness—or grasping too tightly at the power that they do have that they feel is slipping away. Acting out of those wounds, flailing in unhealthy ways, trying to regain/retain power.

Just this week a man who was a Vietnam vet opened fire on first responders just down the road in Florence. Tim O’Brien writes in his seminal book on Vietnam, *The Things They Carried*:

They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing - these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of

³ Mary Ann Tolbert, “Mark,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1828.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Theodore Hiebert, “Excursus: Gender in Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 11.

cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it required perfect balance and perfect posture. They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment.⁶

I read this, and I wept for all the moral injuries of war. I have cried so much these last weeks for the pain of all the things we carry. Erin Keane, Executive Editor of *Salon*, tweeted about the #MeToo movement, "Every woman I know has been storing anger for years in her body and it's starting to feel like bees are going to pour out of all of our mouths at the same time."⁷

Rev. Anna Blaedel, a queer-identified United Methodist pastor who has been brought up on charges in her denomination given her sexuality, wrote a blessing this week for those caught up in the fray of this week. Included were these lines:

blessed are you who are raging.
blessed are you who are mourning.
blessed are you who feel numb.
blessed are you who feel sick. and tired. and sick and tired.
blessed are you who refuse to turn away.
blessed are you who need to turn away.
...blessed are you who are weeping.
blessed are you who preach and know that divinity resides in despised, abused, violated flesh.
blessed are you who know deep in your bones that you are good. and beautiful. and beloved. and sacred. and worthy. and believed. and held. and capable of healing beyond your wildest imagination.⁸

Divinity does "resid[e] in despised, abused, violated flesh."⁹ When we come to table with Jesus, each time we tell the story, we tell and re-enact a story that is fraught with trauma and betrayal by the ones he loved the most: us. When we come to the table, we carry our traumas and pain forward, and Jesus meets us there with his own trauma in the crucifixion, and the loneliness therein.

⁶ Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 20–21.

⁷ Erin Keane, "Every Woman I Know Has Been Storing Anger for Years in Her Body and It's Starting to Feel like Bees Are Going to Pour out of All of Our Mouths at the Same Time.," Tweet, @eekshecried, June 27, 2018, accessed October 6, 2018, <https://twitter.com/eekshecried/status/1012179318456414208?lang=en>.

⁸ Kayla Blaedel, "Blessed Are You Who Are Raging Poem Posted by Loey Powell," *Facebook*, last modified October 5, 2018, accessed October 5, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/loey.powell>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Lisa Isherwood and Elisabeth Stuart write, “Bodies are the divine presence on earth, they are sacramental and are often profaned.”¹⁰

What more than the human body and its needs makes us present in the world? What reminds us constantly of the demands of relationships more than our body selves? In what other ways can we really become aware of the divine than by looking deeply and bravely into the face of divine matter? This looking does not make something descend that is not otherwise present; it rather makes demands and offers empowerment in the light of divine indwelling.¹¹

The communion table is about Christ’s followers. Now we will never know who was really at that table. But there is an aspect of belief to it—the wild story of Christ. The women were the first to tell of the resurrection, and those women weren’t believed. In the telling and the re-telling, we are reminded to believe women and the most marginalized in our society who are telling tales of wonder and woe, inviting us into their story, for their story is also Christ’s story. Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff write:

The body is at the heart of the Eucharistic celebration. We enter into the mystery of communion with the tortured and risen Christ in the Eucharist through the physical activity of eating and drinking. The Eucharist is a messianic meal in which the resurrection of the body is celebrated. ...Being the body of Christ in the world also takes into account the fact that our physical bodies are porous; they are connected with the environment every second of our existence. The Eucharist is the feast of radical empathy with the most vulnerable.¹²

And yet Christ’s story is one of refusing to be a victim. Jesus says, “I lay down my life in order to take it up again,. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.”¹³

One of my favorite authors, Jeanette Winterson, rewrote the story of the Greek myth of Atlas and Heracles in her book *Weight*. Atlas’ punishment for rebelling against the gods is to hold up the sky. Winterson writes:

Long ago, this violent planet of radioactive rock had learned to become home.

Atlas had loved the earth; the crumble of soil between his fingers, the budding of spring, the slow fruit of autumn. Change.

Now the earth changed but Atlas had stayed still, feeling the tilted axis rotate against his shoulder blades. All his strength was focused into holding up the world. He

¹⁰ Lisa Isherwood and Elisabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 148 in; Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, & Resurrection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 127.

¹¹ Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 148 in; Bieler and Schottroff, *The Eucharist*, 127–128.

¹² Bieler and Schottroff, *The Eucharist*, 131.

¹³ John 10:17b-18a

hardly knew what movement was any more. No matter that he shifted slightly for comfort. The monstrous weight decided everything.

Why?

Why not just put it down?

* * *

Atlas let his hands go from the sides of the world.

Nothing happened.

...Atlas looked back at his burden. There was no burden. There was only the diamond-blue earth gardened in a wilderness of space.¹⁴

Whatever you carry, friends, I remind you of your agency. I remind you of your belovedness. I remind you of your welcome at the table, wounds and all. I remind you that you have the power to take up and put down all the burdens. We can clutch the fear and title of “victim” close to our chests, or we can put them down. We can form relationship across all sorts of differences, including gender, that looks like the creative, life-giving, reciprocal dance between the Trinity; between God and ourselves. We can tell and listen to each others’ unbelievable stories and find that it is faith that unites us, and believe. If we choose to become one with another, as “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh,” may it be a union that is sacred, holy, and lifegiving, and if it is not, may it be ok to walk away and look back and see only the waters of Eden as the promise of what is to come in the vacuum of all that we have let hold us prisoner. Amen.

¹⁴ Jeanette Winterson, *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles*, First Edition edition. (Edinburgh ; New York: Canongate U.S., 2005), 149–150.