

From Permissible to Possible

Psalm 8

Mark 10:2-16

It is safe to say that our Gospel lesson today is likely a favorite of Kim Davis, her supporters and all those on the religious right who consider her a hero for denying marriage licenses to Gay residents in Kentucky. “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.” For Kim Davis this passage is all the proof she needs for taking a hard and fast stance, barricading the door to Gay marriage on the firm belief God has told her what is right. It also serves as fodder for those wishing to deny basic rights to Transgender members with its male and female polarities.

One might think that Jesus’ word about divorce would give pause to someone who is on her fourth marriage. “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” But, Kim Davis has an escape clause on that particular problem she might otherwise have with these words spoken by Jesus about divorce. Kim says, “I have been forgiven.”

Davis does rather remind me of Delmar in the movie “O Brother Where Art Thou”. Delmar is one of three escaped convicts who comes upon a large group of people who are stepping into a river for baptism.

Delmar jumps to the front of the line, gets baptized, and bursts out of the water saying “*well that’s it, boys. I’ve been redeemed. The preacher’s done warshed away all my sins and transgressions. It’s the straight and narrow from here on out, and heaven everlasting’s my reward*”.

His companion Ulysses says to Delmar: “*what are you talking about?*”

Delmar replies: *The preacher says all my sins is warshed away, including that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo. Neither God nor man’s got nothin’ on me now. C’mon in boys, the water is fine.*”

Kim Davis received further notoriety last week when she apparently met with the Pope. Sean Winters, a writer for the Catholic Reporter, wrote an article arguing that the Pope, who had generally managed to avoid the cultural wars of U.S. politics and in general communicates a message of compassion, was poorly advised in having this meeting. Vatican insistence, he writes, that the Pope was giving support to conscientious objection rings hollow. Winters argues that the Pope stepped into a mess that he would have been well served to stay out of.

Those of us who put our faith in a Still Speaking God, and find in Jesus someone who is the incarnation of love and justice, rather wonder if Jesus, like the Pope meeting with Kim Davis, has muddled his own message of compassion, by stepping into this messy controversy with the Pharisees. What is Jesus doing with these seemingly unyielding words about marriage between a man and a woman, and his apparent

uncompromising stance on divorce? Beyond all that, you might be wondering, what does any of this have to do with World Communion? One of those other texts for the day certainly could have been a better choice than this one.

Ironically, it is Kim Davis's creative interpretive approach to Scripture that sheds light on what Jesus is doing. Rather than let a Biblical text taken in isolation stand as a condemnation for herself or anyone else who has been divorced. Kim Davis gets down her Bible, thumbs through it and then points out there is a theme in the Bible that is the lens through which we make sense of and interpret this particular passage of the Bible. It's called forgiveness or love or grace or compassion, all of which take precedent over judgment and condemnation.

Using a text in isolation is precisely what the Pharisees are doing when they seek to trip Jesus up with a question on divorce. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" They, of course, are relying on the law of Moses, which Jesus quickly gets them to acknowledge. "Moses gave us the green light," they say.

Jesus recognizes the inherent problem with the passage from Moses they quote in isolation. First, the law permitting divorce applies only to men, creating an unjust situation for women. Second, divorce was hardest on women, who because of unequal treatment were left destitute. Third and most important the question they posed about

divorce is essentially an effort to identify the minimum requirement for living in faithfulness to God's love. "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you" says Jesus.

If we are honest, most of us would have to admit that we are often interested in minimum requirements. It's a reasonable desire. Michele and I have membership at the Y and our health insurance gives us a discount if we put in a certain number of hours. No one asks what is the maximum I can do to get that discount? The question we ask is what is the least I have to do in order to qualify for a reduced fee on my health insurance? As I get near the end of the month, the question I am asking the attendant is, am I near 12 yet?

When I was in High School, I read a book called *Silas Marner* by George Elliot. Our English teacher gave us an assignment of going into the library, finding a book we wanted to read and then writing a report on that book. I wrote a decent report and I think I was about to get a good grade until my teacher asked, "Why did you chose *Silas Marner*?". I answered, a little too honestly, "it was the shortest book I could find". I probably deserved a C grade for that answer alone.

We have a finite amount of time, energy and resources. It is natural for us to ask, what is the least that is needed? What can I get by with? What is the minimum requirement here? It is, of course, one thing when we take this approach with our Y membership or even a

reading assignment in high school, it is another thing when we take this minimalist approach in our relationships with one another and with God.

Jesus recognizes that the approach to Scripture taken by the Pharisees has nothing to do with the expansive liberating spirit of God's word and everything to do with this very human tendency to do the least amount needed to get by. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" This is where Jesus employs what we will call the Kim Davis approach to Biblical interpretation. Rather than being hemmed in by the narrowness of a single text, which in isolation, treats women unjustly, Jesus says, "But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female...." This has nothing to do with the spectrum of sexual orientation or gender identity. Nor is it a judgment on the brokenness that sometimes comes in our individual relationships. This Genesis story has everything to do with God's deepest desire that we live in harmony with one another, with creation and with God.

These so called hard words about divorce are Jesus way of rejecting the minimum that is permissible in favor of what is possible as citizens of God's Realm. Like Kim Davis, Jesus is taking the broad underlying theme of our common humanity, our common unity, and saying forgiveness, love, grace, compassion, trumps judgment. This creative unity rooted in God's love, is the interpretive lens through which we come to understand Scripture and in which we are called to live and flourish.

Doing the minimum will never bring wholeness to our relationships with one another. Doing the minimum will never bring peace to a world wracked with violence or stop the tragic loss of life as we again witnessed this week in Oregon. Doing the minimum will never address the underlying issues that cause racial divisions in our country. Doing the minimum will never enable people of many faiths or no faith to live free of hostility, seeing each other as brothers and sisters, as one family. Doing the minimum will never give our children the foundation they need or our Elders the support they need. Doing the minimum will never undo the damage done by years of colonialism in so many parts of our world. Doing the minimum will never enable us to heal our wounded planet.

It is this minimalist approach, doing the least love requires, that the disciples, much like Kim Davis, utilize when parents bring their children to see Jesus. Blocking the door to the entry of these little ones, the disciples say “no you cannot come in here. Children do not belong”. Jesus becomes indignant, as he does whenever roadblocks are placed in front of the possibility of God’s Realm. *“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs”*.

Jesus says no to this minimalist approach, looking only for what is permissible, the least that we need do

in living out God's love. Jesus offers a resounding yes to God's true intent of wholeness, well being and unity revealed at the very beginning of creation and which Jesus proclaims as the Realm of God. What does love require? Today we celebrate world communion, affirming our unity with brothers and sisters around the world. The table is open. All are welcome. No exceptions. Living out the possibility and promise of God's Realm of love and justice, we could have it no other way.

Psalm 8

The Psalmist knows that as human beings we have a unique responsibility for living in harmony with all creation. We are caretakers of this earth that is entrusted to us. The youngest of children remind us that human arrogance is no match for the majesty and beauty of God's creation. When we live in humility and faithfulness, says the Psalmist, God crowns us with glory and honor.

O God, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O God, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Mark 10:2-16

Our lesson from the Gospel of Mark today is one that strikes a discordant with those of us who believe Jesus is the embodiment of God's love. In response to yet another question intended to trap him, Jesus speaks what sound like harsh words about divorce and rigid words about gender. Yet, as is always the case with Jesus, he has a way of surprising us. Jesus refuses to turn away from the unity of God's creation, underscoring this Realm of God message with an unambiguous embrace of children.

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 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."

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