

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, October 6, 2024
"Finding the Good News"

Young at Heart Message

I bet you never thought that we would be talking about sponges during a worship service, and yet, today our message is going to start off with a discussion about sponges.

I have two sponges here – one is a used sponge that has done its time washing a bunch of dishes.

It is already wet and has been squeezed out many times.

The other is a brand new sponge – still dry from the packaging and eager to absorb water.

Which of these sponges do you suppose will be able to absorb more water?

I have two bowls with water in them. Should we test it out?

I put the same amount of water in both bowls.

Let's see which one will hold more water.

The older sponge that has already absorbed water in the past wasn't able to absorb the water in the bowl as easily as the new sponge.

The new sponge was eager to absorb water and absorbed pretty much all of the water in the bowl.

It may even have room to absorb some of the water from the other bowl.

What do you think the purpose of this "experiment" was? What does it teach us?

Ultimately, this demonstration reminds us that as we get older and have absorbed more information and have more life experience, it is not as easy for us to absorb new things.

Let me give you another real-life example.

As most of you know, I was a professional dog trainer in my previous life.

Part of my job was to teach training classes.

The vast majority of the time, I was teaching adults who had a dog that needed training.

I had a lot of tricks I used to help adult learners who had already absorbed a lot of information in the past and came with a lot of assumptions.

Adults, I noticed, tended to think they were already experts on how to train dogs, and often they had a lot of previous knowledge or experience.

This previous knowledge and experience was not necessarily the best knowledge or experience.

Many adults came to classes needing to unlearn old habits as much as they needed to learn new habits.

They were like the older sponge – already filled with knowledge and experience that wasn't necessarily conducive to working with their current dog.

They had a very hard time because they were simultaneously “wringing out” the old knowledge and experience while trying absorb the new information.

Some adults were better at this than others.

But, on the rare occasion when a client would ask if their child could join the class, I observed that most, if not all, of the kids were much better trainers than their parents.

Why?

Because they were fresh, new sponges – ready to absorb new information.

And because they didn't have prior knowledge or experience, they didn't have to try to “wring out” any previous ideas of what dog training should be.

They were eager to learn and work with their dogs, and quickly surpassed any training skills the adults had.

It was fascinating to watch, and it taught me even more about the challenges of teaching adult learners.

And of course, this experience translates to most anything, including scripture interpretation.

As we get older, we tend to get wiser, but we also become more set in our ways.

Our knowledge and experience becomes vaster, but we also become a little less capable of absorbing new information that might be different than what we were taught previously.

It is, of course, the human condition.

We are all sponges when it comes to learning!

But, our “spongy-ness” changes over time as we are molded into adult versions of ourselves.

So, where does this leave us with today’s scripture?

The Message

Today’s lectionary passages can be incredibly challenging passages to read, and even more challenging to preach about.

Partly, the reason they are so challenging is because as soon as (adult) people hear them, they immediately start to form a “sermon” in their own mind.

Most adults have already formed opinions about these passages, whether they really know it or not.

Some will hear the word “divorce” and immediately assume Jesus is condemning it.

This might create deep feelings of guilt or shame for those who have experienced divorce in their lives, or for those who were children of divorced parents.

Some will hear “divorce” and immediately jump to conclusions about everyone who has experienced divorce.

Some will hear this passage and assume Jesus is dictating “rules” about divorce or marriage that are applicable in all times and places.

But no matter what, if a pastor chooses to preach on these passages, it can be difficult to simultaneously “wring out” past knowledge, experience, and assumptions, while also opening people up to being able to “absorb,” or think about different ways of hearing this text.

So, let’s look at this passage a little bit closer to see what Jesus might mean here.

Before we do, it is important to understand the context in which Jesus is speaking.

It's always important to understand context when we read the Bible, but it is especially important when we are reading passages that have been used in the past to place guilt and shame on people.

As we know, Jesus rarely, if ever, speaks with the purpose of making people feel guilt or shame.

So, it's hard to imagine he would do that in this case, either.

We have to remember that Jesus lived in the first century.

The concept of divorce in his time was, first of all, that only men could divorce their wives.

And, they could do so for any reason – small or large.

A man could simply decide he was sick of his wife and would rather be with another woman, and he could divorce her and toss her aside.

Unlike today, when women have more rights and the ability to find work and earn a living supporting themselves, women and children in the first century had very limited rights, and no recourse.

The Pharisees in this passage are trying to catch Jesus off guard and are referencing the Law of Moses specifically.

Deuteronomy 24:1, which is the passage being referenced, assumes marriage for most people, but it also assumes a *man's* right to divorce "if she does not please him."

It says nothing about a woman being able to choose divorce.

Within the context of the first century then, Jesus explaining that God made man *and* woman gives women a sense of agency in a time when they had none.

Jesus then talks about men and women becoming one person when they choose to marry one another.

Jesus is talking about a partnership, whereas the assumption in that time was that men controlled the relationship and the marriage.

While this passage may seem quite strict and prescriptive of behavior in marriages, it is actually quite radical for that time period.

Jesus says that both men and women who divorce are unfaithful to their spouse if they remarry.

Again, this might sound harsh in today's culture, but in this context, he is emphasizing the equality of partnership, and he's suggesting accountability for both men and women.

This is huge and unexpected in a world where women were not considered equal partners.

Jesus goes on, then, to include children too.

Children are so valuable that they help us enter the realm of God.

Children are fresh little sponges – eager to learn and grow and change the world with each new generation!

The disciples tell the children to stop bothering Jesus, but he tells them to let the children come to him.

Those children had not yet absorbed the rules that their parents had.

Jesus didn't need to teach them to unlearn what they thought they knew about these matters, because they didn't already have the norms set forth by previous knowledge and experience.

This passage is not a condemnation. Rather, it is a reminder that God's love liberates.

This passage is not as much about divorce as it is about recognizing the image of God in everyone – especially those who have tended to be disempowered by society.

It is not intended to be a prescriptive passage, and it definitely is not intended to make people feel a sense of guilt and shame if they have been divorced, if they are thinking about divorce, or if they are in a situation that may require divorce.

I vividly remember a woman I knew who was taught, perhaps even using this passage, that divorce would mean being sentenced to hell.

She had been divorced, out of necessity (her former spouse was abusive and she was not safe in that situation), and yet she believed until her dying day that she could not be absolved of her "sin" of divorce.

I will never forget that because I don't think Jesus would ever intend to place that kind of guilt or shame on someone.

There is too much good news in the life and work of Jesus to lead me to believe that if Jesus sat down with that woman, he would condemn her.

Jesus would not treat her or anyone else as though they were not lovingly made in God's image.

Jesus didn't spend his entire ministry trying to teach us how to love one another, just to condemn us in a few passages.

You might be wondering, then, if I believe Jesus is condoning divorce.

I don't believe Jesus is condemning or condoning divorce. It's a reality of the world he lives in, and a reality of the world we live in.

I believe he's addressing the question the Pharisees asked him, using their assumptions and the social norms in place at the time, to demonstrate one small way that humans could open themselves up to better loving other humans.

Jesus set examples for us to follow, albeit in his time and place, which is the only context he had.

Jesus could not have predicted that in the year 2024, women would be treated at least in some parts of the world more as equals. So he did his best with the cultural implications he had to work with.

We have no business treating anyone as though they were not created in God's image.

This text uses a first-century situation to tell us to stop participating in traditions that disempower and destroy human beings and to start living in love.

If we consider the context of this situation, it becomes a bit easier to set aside our prior knowledge and experience with this text and understand that Jesus did not intend to condemn people with his words.

Rather, he intended to widen the scope for people in that time period – to move the needle ever so slightly toward justice and equality.

If we can open ourselves up to new and different possibilities for this text, we can hear the passage as good and hopeful news:

Each of us – men, women, children – *everyone* – is created in God's image.

We are loved, and we belong in Christ – not to feel guilt or shame, but only to feel loved and hopeful.

Amen.

Let us pray:

Loving and gracious God, we come before you in gratitude for the gentle reminder that we are lovingly made in your image. You remind us through your Son, Jesus Christ, that while there is always room for improvement, we are also loved just as we are in this time and place. May we each continue to feel your love and grace surround us, and may we remember this love as we receive Holy Communion in unity with our Christian siblings around the world. Amen.