“Family Matters”
Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12, Mark 10:2-16

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 3, 2021, 27th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Proper 22, World Communion Sunday, dedicated to all spouses who work hard in marriage, to all whose marriages end in divorce and for all our children and the generations who follow us, and always to the glory of God!

“Family Matters”

Job 1:1,2:1-10; Hebrews 1:1-4,2:5-12, Mark 10:2-16

Being married to Job could not have been easy. It meant that you would be “collateral damage” in the battle between God and Satan focused on your husband. In today’s passage we get a first glance how intense the battle between the Adversary of God and God’s most faithful servant will soon become.

Satan is all about persecuting Job. He is going to flatten him. He intends to turn Job and everyone and everything that Job loves into a pancake and serve them all for breakfast in the cosmic battle of the ages. Satan tells God that he will torment this righteous man until his suffering is palpable and everyone will know it. He is not messing around, and he is not kidding. The reading of this lection actually makes your skin crawl.

Mrs. Job is a witness and a sideways sufferer in all the afflictions cast upon her husband. She advises her husband to take a stand – a defiant stand against God. She says, “Curse God and then die.” This is far from consoling for her husband – don’t you think?
In the book of Job, we never hear her name. But a very important Jewish document called “The Testament of Job,” dating back to the First Century before the common era (2100 years ago), refers to her as Sitis. For generations, the pious Jewish scribes would not print her name or what she said. Instead of “Curse God,” they actually wrote the words “Bless God” because they couldn’t bring themselves to put cursing God on the breath of Job, or his wife or the pages of Scripture. Our translation corrects that today. It took until the NRSV translation to correct this poor interpretation because they believed to curse God would not only violate the Third Commandment but also would rupture Job’s basic attitude of trust in God and the qualities of goodness he had shown all people all his life. But, Sitis was not where Job was in relation to being “a suffering servant.” This wasn’t her gig. (Drawn from Walter Brueggemann’s commentary, Texts for Preaching, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1993, pp. 533-534.)

Job won’t abide with Sitis’ attitude – and actually talks down to his wife in the text we read today – as he reminds her that we must all experience many things from the hand of God – some positive and some negative. As his skin is literally crawling in pain, and Sitis is watching this in pain, Job stays strong. We are only in the first chapter of what will become 40 more chapters of misery. Through it all, Job will not abandon his deep trust in God. He will not give into the torture of Satan and even the questioning of his spouse – about God and about himself.

I have a lot of compassion for both Job and Sitis in this early section of what will return to our readings in the coming weeks. In the interplay of love and marriage placed on the big stage of a
battle between God and Satan, Job is the object lesson and Sitis is caught in the crossfire.

We can relate to her. In the crossfire, we all experience the hardships of relationships and the suffering that goes with it. While we might be willing to take on the challenges that come directly at us, that come our way, it hurts badly and deeply when we look into the eyes of the ones we love and see their pain and all they are struggling with. It doubles down on us and kills us sometimes.

It is in the crossfire that I find relationships and marriages are made or broken. They either succeed or fail in these moments.

When we come into marriage, we are really paying attention in that moment at the altar. When we say the words in marriage “for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health,” we are not really thinking about that. We hear these words – “better, richer, health.” Perhaps that is why we find ourselves caught so often in the struggles of relationship we discover that “the worst, the poorer and the sickness” are also part of the deal. And they are hard to face. Both Job and Sitis are challenged to the max – this much we know for sure.

In Mark 10:2-16, Jesus gets caught in the crossfire as well. The Pharisees are trying to get Jesus to talk about divorce. But Jesus wants to talk about marriage. Although divorce was not a debatable question among the Jews of Jesus’ time, the allowable grounds for divorce was a very hot topic. The Pharisees want to know – will Jesus stand with the traditional hardliners and speak strongly and clearly and damn those who are going through divorce or will be stand with Hillel and go with all the permissive
liberals and go with the other translation that all will be well – everything is fine? Which will it be? They want to pin him down. They want to know where Jesus stands on the law and they want Jesus to affirm their lifelong belief that two people can only be joined together in a profound and meaningful love and union that lasts forever and that is all.

Jesus is very interested in the love and union part. He wants to focus on the gifts of God’s creation in relationships. Rather than focus on the sweeping legal prohibitions, he wants to focus on the goodness of people in relationships – both the people who marry and make it together AND the people who don’t make it in marriage. He is not interested in putting anyone in the “Damnable Pile.”

While the Pharisees want him to speak out about divorce, he sees them as the problem. They are the ones whose hearts are hardening. And that’s why the laws were made in the first place. They were made severe by people who can’t deal with it. Jesus wants to really take a stand for marriage and the blessing of relationships and hearts which hold two people together.

I would say that at this point in human history, we have a very beautiful and wide-reaching understanding of what marriage is. We have grown a lot. But divorce still hangs out there.

I have preached about divorce a number of times through the years. It is tough reality and the Bible truly wrestles in lots of places with texts around divorce. I’m convinced that God is struggling throughout the Bible with the same thing we are struggling with. We want it to be for good. We want it to last forever. But, sometimes it doesn’t. So, what do you do when it doesn’t last
forever? I believe God is in the midst of the struggle. You see it. You feel it in the texts around divorce. If we feel the pain, we need to know that God feels it first.

I have seen up close, couples who struggle in marriage. Many years ago, at my last church, a couple on the edge of divorce came to me at the end of their rope. After one session, they angrily accused me saying that “only God could save their marriage.” There had been infidelity by the husband, harsh unkindness and abusive words exchanged, and a deep Faultline of breaking trust going on.

I responded: “Here is what I actually said. I said that throughout your life together you have not once asked for God’s help or for forgiveness from one another. You have not once looked with kindness on each other in the time I had with you. So, I told you, if you don’t seek any help from God, you can’t find help from any human source that can turn this around.” They blamed me for “bad counseling” and left me angry. Shortly after, they left one another angrier still.

Jesus knows that family matters are very important to us. He also knows we often lose sight of the children in all that goes on in the crossfire of adult behaviors. There is no mistaking what he does next. He turns his back on the Pharisees and on the disciples – and sees the children. He looks away from who are poking at him and wanting to pin him down on legalities around divorce and he sees the children. He turns his face and his entire being to the children close at hand. He shares his love for the children – his anointing if you will.

The disciples can’t see this. The Pharisees can’t see this. But Jesus knows this is a family matter too. The most important ones are right here in front of us.
As much as Sitis feels caught in the crossfire of the battle between Satan and God which is focused on Job, the children of our world are too often caught in the crossfire between parents who can’t and won’t work things out. Jesus knows this.

That’s why as the conversation with the Pharisees spins into a legalistic downward spiral, he holds the moment and he calls everyone to accept the Kingdom of God – like a child. The Kids have no status. They have no rights. They are powerless, vulnerable little people who are often deemed a nuisance by the big people around them. By buying into this narrative of society’s devaluation of children, the disciples fail to see the essence of Jesus’ ministry. They have missed what he is all about. They have missed what he means when he talks about the special blessing of kids.

The children receive God with openness, honesty, curiosity, clearness and more. They do it with grace and they do it with love. They don’t make excuses, angle for better deals. They don’t get tripped up with resentments and anger (that comes along later). At this point, these kids are just who they are.

In these difficult texts that deal with family matters today, I ask us to remember who we are and to whom we belong – because we are children, too. We are all children of our Living and Loving God. And as children of God, we would all do well to come to God in openness and honesty, curiosity and clearness rather than bound up in all our issues – and walk away.

On this World Communion Sunday, Jesus is calling 2.4 billion Christians to his table of grace. As we come to the table, let us remember to be a family in all of this – that no matter what has
caused splits or divisions in our own families, in this church family, we have to follow what he tells us to do and welcome God’s kingdom like a child.
As we come to his table today, let us receive these words of welcome from our sisters and brothers at the Iona Community in Iona, Scotland. Listen their words of practical instructions:

*In the Gospels, Jesus was always the guest.*
*In the homes of Peter and Jairus,*
*Martha and Mary,*
*Joanna and Susanna,*
*he was always the guest.*

*At the meal tables of the wealthy*  
*where he pled the case of the poor,*  
*he was always the guest.*

*Upsetting polite company,*  
*befriending isolated people,*  
*welcoming the stranger,*  
*he was always the guest.*

*But here, at this table,*  
*Jesus is the host.*

*Those who wish to serve him*  
*Must first be served by him.*  
*Those who want to follow him*  
*Must first be fed by him.*  
*Those who would wash his feet*  
*must first let him make them clean.*
For this is the table
where God intends us to be nourished.
This is the time when Christ can make us new.

So come, you who hunger and thirst
for a deeper faith,
for a fuller life,
for better world.
Jesus Christ,
Who has sat at our tables,
Now invites us to be guests at his.

Let us remember to work out our family matters with love and grace
as guests at his table. Amen.

Today’s Benediction from the Church in Argentina:

May the God of Life,
be your guide on the road every day,
be your refuge in times of uncertainty
and be your rest in times of fatigue.
May the God of Life,
strengthen you when you feel weak,
comfort you when you feel sad
and hug you when you feel alone.
May the God of Life, who loves you and knows you,
cover you with the tenderness of a Mother.

Forever. Amen.