

1) Krister Stendahl Story {SUMMARY AT THE CONCLUSION}

2) *Don't give a Biblical text wandering legs! Try to meet it on its OWN ground.*

That is wise counsel regarding the Scripture texts we've heard today.

Given wandering legs, each could be dismissed with the roll of an eye:

- A God who lets Satan trash Job's life, just to prove a point: *Morally outrageous!*
- An elaborate discussion in the Letter to the Hebrews about a cosmic pecking order—
who's on top—Jesus or the angels: *Arcane! Irrelevant!*
- A hard line from Jesus on the subject of divorce: *Unrealistic! Totally insensitive!*

If Stendahl is right, however, such eye-rolling should be haunted by two hanging questions:

- *What if we react too quickly—from our own preconceptions—
irrespective of author intentions?*
- *What if where THEY are coming from poses for US a challenge—
not just to our reactions, but to the way we see the world that SHAPES those reactions?*

3) An "originalist" interpreter might dig in and double down:

These words mean exactly what they say. Author intent is immaterial.

But if we make no attempt, as best we can, to discern AUTHOR intent,
we're left with words that—black and white though THEY be—easily ooze into ink blots,
open to interpretation shaped by OUR intent, unconscious though IT be.

4) Case in point: It makes a difference, once you know that the Book of Job
wasn't written either to DEFEND, or to ATTACK belief in a God
who impulsively authorizes human disaster on a dare.

The narrative poetry we call Job is a protest against a simplistic view of God and the world:
that to HAVE lots of goods is positive proof that, in God's eyes, you ARE good,
and that ill fortune is God's punishment, pure and simple, for just how bad you are.

The Book of Job is a long dramatic push back against such crude theology:

However difficult to understand the ways of God may be, the world is not THAT simple!

5) Another case in point: It makes a difference, once you know that the Letter to the Hebrews
was written to an early church community, under nagging, low grade persecution.

A community disheartened—wondering if the Jesus they worshipped
was so far above them that He couldn't feel their pain,
or so "all too human" that He couldn't be of help.

The author sends them a sermon to help them see that

Jesus high above them, and Jesus suffering with them—

BOTH are not just true, but inseparable.

Jesus, says the preacher, is at once far higher than the angels, and totally down to earth.

If you can embrace this complex truth, he says, you can face this persecution.

6) It's worth noting that, in BOTH cases, the authors mean to show that God's ways with the world can't be superficially described—AND, on the other hand—that thoughtful attempts to illuminate this mystery can't be summarily discarded.

We'll be hearing more from Job and Hebrews in the weeks ahead.

So, with this warning about both simplistic assertions and dismissals, let's explore what Jesus may be intending in his words about divorce.

7) The society where Jesus is speaking (and Mark is reporting) is not very female right-friendly. Married men are by custom and law, free to divorce their wives for any reason or no reason.

As Cricket reminded us in her sermon two weeks ago, a woman without a supervising man—father, husband, brother—was a woman without support—financial or social.

So Jesus is challenging a legal structure that can be manipulated—without redress or recourse, in ways that are discriminating and demeaning—to the detriment of women, but also of men.

(And when Jesus says *a divorced woman commits adultery if she remarries*, He's talking about the social stigma that will attach to a woman left without resources, who will be destitute if she doesn't remarry, and disgraced if she does.)

This alone invalidates simplistic judgments that EITHER *DIVORCE is always wrong because Jesus said so* OR that *JESUS is flat wrong, so pay Him no attention*.

8) But it's not enough to leave the matter there.

The text could still, in Bishop Stendhal's words, be given wandering legs.

So, why does Mark include this teaching of Jesus, and place it where he does?

The best clue we have as to Mark's intent is the way he structures his story.

For the entire first half of the Gospel of Mark,

Jesus is in total control—doing one mighty deed after another.

But then, suddenly the balance shifts—

Jesus shows less and less power—seems weaker and weaker.

Not once or twice, but three times over, he tells his follower he'll soon die.

This saying on divorce is placed between Passion Predictions Two and Three.

It is also set more closely still between two occasions when Jesus seeks out children, shows them care, and tells His disciples, in no uncertain terms:

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and It is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs.

In the sermon she shared two weeks back, Cricket also reminded us that, of all society's members, children were by far the most vulnerable.

The Jesus of unlimited power now deliberately casts his own lot, links his own destiny with those who are least powerful, most vulnerable, most at risk.

That's a very hard thing for his disciples to wrap their minds around, understandably desperate as they are to deny their own vulnerability.

They loudly profess competing claims to be the greatest—
as if the more noise they make, the more self-congratulatory adjectives they employ,
the better they can convince themselves that they are not
every bit as vulnerable as the children whom Jesus blesses.

- 9) So this statement Jesus makes about divorce is no free-floating moral prohibition.
It is a challenge—direct and sweeping—to pretention in positions of power—
using the system to get what our social status gives us privileged access to,
using the vulnerability of others to our advantage.

The dream of God, says Jesus, is the reverse of that:

God creates us in the image of God's own power—
the power of mutual strength through mutual relationship in mutual vulnerability.
In your legal machinations, Jesus tells those who are trying to over-power him—
*using the system to get what you want, cost others what it may—
you are totally losing sight of what it MEANS to BE children of God,
in whose vulnerability is God's very strength.*

Which is not unrelated, in fact, to what, in their own respective settings and ways,
the authors of Job and Hebrews are also saying.

So I'd do well to check my eye-rolling at what I hear all three texts say.

Because that could easily prevent me from seeing what God may want to show me.
Mutual vulnerability—does that make any practical sense in a political environment
sliding with increasing momentum into a *modus operandi* of "take no prisoners"?

What Jesus is suggesting seems to be the epitome of childlike naivete.

Childlike? Yes, indeed—as He sees and blesses children.

Naïve? Considering where we are, maybe not so much.

It was—and is—the challenge of Jesus to his disciples.

A challenge to mutual vulnerability—
a challenge not so much to wrap our minds around.
but to wrap our hands and hearts and lives around.

Because, like the Man says:

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

Krister Stendhal Story:

I was sitting with a small group of colleagues in a seminar led by Krister Stendahl, Bishop in the Swedish Lutheran Church, and World Class New Testament Scholar. Observed from a distance it was obvious that Stendhal was stiff—his body arched back in position seemingly aloof—even imperious. The explanation appeared "obvious": He was Swedish. Lutheran, a bishop, and a Herr Professor. But appearances and explanations from a distance can be misleading. Apologizing to us for his stiffness, Stendhal told us that, years earlier, he had been in a bad automobile accident that required the fusing of his spine. In order to read and study, he had elected for his spine to be fused in a forward prone position—which meant that, to engage others with eye contact, he had to compensate by tilting far backward—hence his forbidding posture. Things aren't always what they seem on the surface.

He was discussing with us a passage from John 14, where Jesus is giving His farewell address to fearful disciples just before His crucifixion: *I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by Me.* “Now,” said Stendahl, “some people say that this text proves that all other religions, save Christianity, are false. But if you give a text LEGS and let it WALK AWAY from where it belongs in Scripture; you can get it to follow you anywhere you like.”

“This is a love lullaby, meant to send assurance to his closest friends. It is not ABOUT which, if any religion is superior! When I say that my wife is the most beautiful woman in the world, I MEAN it with all my heart and soul. But I am making no judgments whatsoever about the beauty of YOUR wife.”