

*Stewardship of Life in the Light of Christ*  
Sermon for October 3, 2021: Proper 22, Year B  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park  
The Rev. Chase Danford, Priest-in-Charge

*Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. (Mark 10:14)*

This is definitely the highlight of this week's sometimes troubling lectionary readings. Amid accounts of Job's suffering, gender binaries, and prohibitions on divorce, we can sigh with relief at these comforting words from Jesus. The Reign of God belongs to the children. Of course, Jesus' next line can be troubling if read literally: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Does that mean adult converts will not share in the heavenly banquet? That cannot be right because one of Jesus' central themes is bringing more people to the table, and expanding the notion of who is "in."

Indeed, in this same reading, when Jesus condemns divorce and emphasizes heterosexual gender binaries by speaking of the joining of male and female as one flesh from the beginning of creation, we have to read it from his cultural context. Jesus is not speaking to the culture wars of the 20th and 21st centuries. In first century Palestine, his words were actually empowering and liberating for women. He reminded his listeners that God "made them male and female" because that means that women are made in the image of God just as much as men are. And while we are no doubt troubled by Jesus' prohibition of divorce, it's important to see what he's speaking against. There were no provisions in the Law of Moses for a woman to divorce her husband, and there was no protection put in place for the wife of a man who wanted to divorce her. He needed only to find "something

objectionable” about her, and scholars have noted that the objection could be pretty much anything. Apologies to Moses, but this whole thing sounds pretty misogynistic. Jesus then criticizes divorce in part because men were abusing it, leaving women in a vulnerable situation where they faced impoverishment and social stigma. In first century Palestine, if their husbands divorced them, women had little opportunity to create a self-sufficient life. Given the economic and social realities of the time,, there was little chance that there would be droves of women seeking to divorce their husbands. The real risk was men divorcing their wives without just cause. So, by tightening the restriction around divorce, Jesus increases protections for women and in so doing elevates their social status.

In addition to empowering women, Jesus elevates the role of human intimacy. By invoking Genesis in saying “two become one flesh,” Jesus is reminding his listeners that humans are meant for companionship and society. We are meant to be in relationship with one another. God created the world because God is love and wanted to share that love. God created humans and made sure that there were two of them so that the love of God could be shared by creatures who are conscious of this love. Marriage is a ritual enactment of this divine gift of love. As such it is a sacred covenant, and it should remind us of our holy obligation to be in right relationship with all our fellow children of God.

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So, when Jesus says we need to receive the Kingdom as little children, he is not being exclusive. He's inviting us into a metaphor: Be as children. See the world through the eyes of a child, and you will experience the Reign of God. How do

children see the world? With awe and wonder. Faith, then, is the commitment to strive to see the world with awe and wonder even when we find ourselves surrounded by sadness, fear, pain, anxiety, or injustice. Faith is looking for the light in the darkness, the light that is not overcome. When we can't see it ourselves, faith cries out, "Christ be our light!" Faith is choosing church even when we're not feeling it ourselves, knowing that our fellow Christians will shine the light of Christ for us to find our way. That is the covenant we enter into through our baptism and when we come to this table in community to be joined as one into the Body of Christ, to be the Body of Christ to the world. And our covenant extends beyond one another as humans. That's why we are blessing our animal friends today, as a sign of the sacred covenant we are in with our pets. They help us see the world as children, no matter our age, and in turn, we are entrusted with their care. We are also entrusted with the care of the whole world, all of Creation. In Genesis, God created the first human for companionship, and then created another human to be that one's companion. And then God placed the care of the world in their hands. God made them stewards of creation.

All that we have comes from the Creator of the Universe, and it's up to us to use the divine gifts wisely. We are stewards of the resources God has entrusted to us, resources we are called to use for the Church's mission to seek and serve Christ in all people. That's why we call the pledge drive for the church's annual operating budget a stewardship campaign. Speaking of pledges, I'm pleased to announce Trinity's 2022 Stewardship Campaign today. "Christ Be Our Light!" is our theme, inspired by Bernadette Farrell's hymn: *Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts. Shine through the darkness. Christ, be our light! Shine in Your church gathered today.* By choosing this theme, the Stewardship Committee invites us to consider how in this time, which many have experienced as a period of difficulty and

darkness, Christ still shines brightly in our hearts and in our church. With your commitment, we will shine the light of Christ to a world in need of healing, hope, and peace. Over the next several weeks, our whole parish will engage in a spiritual practice of discerning how God is calling us to share our resources--not just our money, but also our gifts of time and skill. Your commitment will literally help keep the lights on in our church, for our worship and for our community programs. But it's about more than utilities, maintenance, and salaries. We give to this church so that we can change the world.

When Jesus condemned the divorce practices of his day in order to elevate the status of women and the role of human intimacy in serving as a reminder of God's covenantal love, he didn't hand down rules. He invited us to greater freedom by showing us that we are all sacred and are all in sacred relationship with one another. When Jesus said to come to him as a child, he didn't mean that adults can't change directions or that anyone needs to leave their reason at the church door. Instead, he invited us to greater joy by seeing the world through the eyes of a child, with the same sense of awe and wonder that we all once shared. In inviting us to greater freedom and greater joy, Jesus offers us greater life. The abundant life of the Reign of God. Saying yes to this life, life as it should be for the children of God, we also say yes to caring for one another, for all of God's creatures, and for all of creation. We say yes to being royal stewards of our Heavenly Sovereign. We say yes to being guided by the love and light of Christ as we undertake our role as caretakers and stewards of the church's mission to change to world. We say yes, "Christ be our light!"

Christ *is* our light. May the light of Christ's love shine in our hearts and shine through the church. Amen.