

Mark 10:2-9
10/8/2006

It was my sixth birthday, and the events of that fateful day are etched on my brain. The kitchen was a flurry of activity even at 11:00 AM. My party was to commence at 2:00 PM. The napkins were already set out. I had chosen the movie E.T. as the party's theme, and the ice cream cake, specially ordered in the shape of Spielberg's cosmic visitor, even had a long extended finger with bright red icing in the shape of a star to look as though it were aglow. Seeking refuge from the frantic pace of the kitchen, I went upstairs to my bedroom with my cousin Karalin and my sister Cherilyn. We Southerners do love names that rhyme. Once I got to my bedroom, Cherilyn, Karalin, and I lounged on my bedspread and its 1980's earth-toned orange hues. My sister wanted us to play, "Mother may I." My OLDER sister reveled in such games of domination. According to the rules of "Mother may I," a player can basically do anything that he or she desires, as long as the participant submits a proposal of potential activities by verbally positing the prescribed question, "Mother may I?" If a participant, though, neglects to ask permission with those very words, then some form of punishment is readily rendered by the person playing "Mother."

And let me be clear, my sister was always the mother. And that day, for some reason, I was feeling a wee-bit rebellious. I did not want to play "Mother May I". It was MY birthday, after all. If I had been the "Mother," to whom requests would be made and to whom control was given, perhaps I would have been more amendable to the game. But instead, I got up to leave my own bedroom. But as I did, my sister slyly smirked and said, "You didn't say 'Mother may I?'" And before I could protest, my sister proceeded with punishment. She grabbed my right arm and my right leg and began to twirl me around, until my head accidentally slammed into a bedpost. I began to cry. On my sixth birthday, a few hours before my party, I went to the hospital, and that year, I got more stitches than presents.

I got home from the hospital right before the other children arrived. The doctor hurried to make the party even possible. But I was still not allowed to run and play after my ordeal, and my parents decided that the other kids at the party should also abide by such standards. You can only imagine the irony of giving children a great deal of sugar and then having them sit still and settle into a nice "calm, collected," game of bingo. The party, needless to say, did not go well, and to this day, every once in awhile, I enjoy reminding my sister of my post-traumatic sibling stitches stress.

Ruthlessness sometimes trumps sharing for siblings. Cain and Able, Jacob and Esau, Cinderella and those nasty step-sisters. There is a long tradition of punishment exerted at the hands of siblings. Most do not even need the guise of the game, "Mother May I." For years, Christians and others have talked about oppression and hierarchy. Some of us have railed against votes to take away funding for the disenfranchised, and condemned abuses of power such as Foleys' follies. And many of us have even worked toward equalizing relationships and society so that all are included. But the fact is, even when those oppressive structures are gone and when people are given relative equality there exists a huge possibility for trouble in human relationships. Even in the equality found in most sibling relationships, there is a potential power grab and scramble for any perceived scarcities such as control, love, or even the ability to play "Mother" in

“Mother may I”. And this dynamic is true of any equal relationship. In our reading from Genesis, we hear how God created humanity to be equal partners with one another, but we also know that such a partnership eventually leads to doubting God’s love and protection and eating of the forbidden fruit. And indeed, in our own times, as the roles of partners and husbands and wives have become more equal in society and the responsibilities became shared instead of pre-determined, the frailty of those relationships has only been dramatized. And yet, we still seek equality in relationships and society, still feel that our faith in God invites and compels us to do so. So, my Brothers and Sisters in Christ, my equals before God, that is what I would like to talk about today: relationships of equality and how we might be able to live into them as Christians. I plan to keep working toward equality, but I want to do so to lessen the problems of the world and my relationships, not exacerbate them.

To begin, I must ask the question of why: Why do relationships of relative equality become more difficult than those of rigid hierarchies? The reason, I believe, comes down to scarcity. Without hierarchies, the distribution of scarce goods becomes an intense negotiation instead of a forgone conclusion. Siblings fight, we hear, because of a perceived scarcity of love and protection. Even if parental love is not limited, siblings fight to get a “share.” Spouses fight many times because they do not feel loved, validated, or protected. Love is, again, scarce. And our very society which is supposedly founded on equality, “All men... [and I want to add...and women]... are created equal,” is also as a capitalist market founded on the distribution of scarce resources. Without domination, it is difficult to determine who gets what without falling into rivalries.

In the section of Mark we heard from today, Jesus gives a long exposition about discipleship. And in this specific reading, Jesus talks about marriage, but if we get distracted by marriage, we have missed the point. This lesson is for all followers of God and all our relationships of equality. In the scene Jesus is asked by the Pharisees whether or not it is lawful for a divorce to take place, and Jesus responds, as do many good teachers, with a question instead of an answer, “What did Moses command you?” And the Pharisees respond that Moses allowed for a certificate of dismissal, and Jesus adds, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.” The context is marriage, but the issue is all relationships. God ordained marriage and equality and partnership for all. God even gave us the tools to handle such a equality by sharing an abundance in the garden. We corrupted that, could not handle our equality, and we believed there was scarcity even in the midst of abundance. Thus, many of our marriages have become abusive, destructive, and instead of building up the body of Christ, we have detracted from it and had to start over.

But God ordained relationships of equality. And God continues an interest in equality by sending God’s Son Jesus to live as our equal on the earth. And the way that he again shows us how to handle equality is by reframing our experience of scarcity. For, what is the most scarce resource in life, but life itself. But what if someone looks at that scarce resource, faces losing that resource, and does not even seem to care. What if what was thought to be a scarce resource was instead an abundance? Jesus lives as James Alison says, “As though death were not.” He does not fear death, because he trusts that it cannot hold us. And indeed, he comes back from death. And the reason, that I believe he does so is not to do a magic trick but instead to show us that life is about abundance, not scarcity, and if we are really to work toward relationships of equality, we

must trust that there is enough of everything for all. And we must be willing to share of our abundance. Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly. What if, instead of resources being scarce, oil and food, instead of power being at a premium, we can rest assured that there is enough for everyone and anyone. And we can give of ourselves to one another, because in equality, as brothers and sisters, that is what we do.

The fact is, my sister and I, growing up, often did not appreciate our equality. We did not share in our parents' love, even though there was more than enough. We as humans have trouble appreciating that there is enough of love, of peace, and everything under the sun for God to give us. But that is why we come here, to remember that God is abundance, that we do not need to feel scarcity, that we can share our lives with one another and not hold onto them until they wither. And we remember that our equality should be a goal, mutual interdependence with one another should be our goal, a goal that rests on a foundation of abundance.