

Do You Have What it Takes?

18th Sunday After Pentecost

World Communion Sunday

October 7, 2012

Jill R. Russell

Texts: Job 1.1 , 2.1-10;
Psalm 26;
Hebrews 1.1-4, 2.5-12 ;
Mark 10.2-16

Do you have what it takes? It's an aggressive question, isn't? It's meant to put you in your place and demand that you prove yourself. The prologue of Job imagines a scene in the council of God where this question is posed by a devil's advocate enquiring whether Job has what it takes to remain faithful even in the face of unspeakable suffering. The Pharisees issue a similar challenge when they pose question after question to Jesus trying to see what he is made of.

In the text for today it appears that the Pharisees are seeking some guidance on the question of divorce and remarriage. They are *not* seeking guidance. They know perfectly well what the law of Moses allows. They are looking to test Jesus. Or probably more to the point, they are looking to destroy Jesus. Jesus is in the territory of Herod when they ask this question. Do you remember what happened the last time someone commented on the question of divorce in Herod's presence? John the Baptist condemned Herod's divorce and remarriage and he was executed as a result. The Pharisees ask a question seemingly about the law but it's really meant to push Jesus up against a wall and to force him to comment on controversial issue in a dangerous territory.

The movement of Mark's gospel in chapters 9 and 10 keep circling around the question of who is the greatest. Who can be in the realm of God? Who can command the power of God's realm? In variety ways and from a variety of perspectives this question of "Do you have what it takes?" keeps coming up.

I'm aware that competition can be healthy. Pushing ourselves to be the very best that we can be is important. It can even be a form of worship – a way that we respond in gratitude to the many of gifts from our Creator. When you are eager to grow and change and push beyond perceived limits, a question like “Do you have what it takes?” can be inspiring.

But all too often, as in the case of the Pharisees pushing Jesus, the question reeks with aggression and is only steps away from violence. I heard a piece on NPR a week or two ago about the practice of hazing on college campuses. You've all heard the horror stories of pledges who have been pushed to prove that they have what it takes to be in a fraternity or sorority and have died in the process. The piece I was listening to was examining why pledges who undergo such humiliation find it so difficult once they are in the fraternity to stop these practices. You'd think the most natural response after going through something so grueling and traumatic would be to say “never again.” When in fact pledges who do prove themselves and get in often look to inflict that same suffering on the next generation and often ratchet up the stakes. The aggressive, competitive nature of our culture that leads us to size one another up and to demand that people prove themselves before they can belong undermines in a fundamental way our capacity for compassion and cooperation. And hazing on college campuses is not some anomaly. Rather it is just an extreme form of an attitude that is rampant in our culture.

On the surface it appears that Jesus is participating in this spirit of one-upmanship in Mark today. To the challenge posed by the Pharisees Jesus turns the question on them and raises the stakes. They want to talk about whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus bypasses their legalism and their patriarchy – only men can issue a certificate of divorce in the law of Moses. Jesus puts them in their place and calls them out on their hardness of heart and instead speaks about the mutual love God intends for human relationships. He essentially says, “if you want to justify yourself before God then you had better rise to the highest of all standards.”

I'm aware of how harsh this passage sounds toward those who have gone through the pain of divorce. It is important to pay attention to whom Jesus is speaking. He is not speaking to those who have gone through the pain of

a marriage ending. His first comments are to the Pharisees and his clarification is to the disciples – two groups who in Mark’s gospel have been playing this game of “who is the greatest” and “do you have what it takes.”

If you want to see how Jesus might respond to someone whose heart is aching after a marriage has ended... then look to this next story. Here the story abruptly shifts toward a completely different direction when Jesus turns to the children. Scholars think the children being brought to Jesus in this text are sick and hurting and in need of healing. The disciples think that Jesus is too busy or too important to take time for fragile and vulnerable children. Jesus is indignant at their assumption. And he says that it is to such as these that the kingdom or realm of God belongs.

You do not have to prove yourself to a child. Your resume - your history - means nothing. Are you openhearted? Will you welcome them with open arms? Are you prone toward fun? Will you laugh and play? Will you listen and slow down? I suppose in one way the question of whether you have what it takes still remains. But the tone shifts entirely from an aggressive throwing down of the gauntlet to a playful invitation.

Certainly, children learn to make distinctions. We teach them that and perhaps it is inevitable as you make your way in the world. But before we get too far down the road of that instruction, perhaps we should sit for a while at some children’s feet to learn what they have to teach us.

Recently, our yard has become the favored gathering place for several households of kids. A week or so ago our postage stamp of a backyard was bustling with twelve kids ranging in age from 3 to 11. They come from families of different backgrounds, education levels, economics, and race. Just this week at a meeting of the stakeholders of Neighborhood connections, we heard the report from our Washington School Neighborhood connectors. They claim that the biggest challenge facing this neighborhood where Hope Church resides is the widespread divide between those of differing education, backgrounds, class and race. People on different sides of that divide don’t know each other and don’t trust each other.

You wouldn't know such divides even exist to watch the play going on in our backyard. Children learn to make those distinctions. They discover them along the way. But that is not their first instinct. Their singular question is do you want to play? If the answer is yes then you are welcome to the party.

World wide communion Sunday is the perfect day to be invited to sit with the children at Jesus' feet. Today we are invited to a feast. Not a feast that is set just before us. We are invited to a table that circles round the globe. The question as you come to this table is not "do you have what it takes?" The only question is "Are you hungry? Are you thirsty?" If the answer is yes, then you are welcome at this table.

I want to close this morning by sharing *A Blessing for World Communion Sunday* by Jan L. Richardson¹ entitled And the Table Will Be Wide.

"And the table will be wide.
And the welcome will be wide.
And the arms will open wide to gather us in.
And our hearts will open wide to receive.

And we will come as children who trust there is enough.
And we will come unhindered and free.
And our aching will be met with bread.
And our sorrow will be met with wine.

And we will open our hands to the feast without shame.
And we will turn toward each other without fear.
And we will give up our appetite for despair.
And we will taste and know of delight.

And we will become bread for a hungering world.
And we will become drink for those who thirst.
And the blessed will become the blessing.
And everywhere will be the feast."

Amen.

¹ This blessing is posted at the following website: <http://paintedprayerbook.com>.

Mark 10.2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.