

*Lord God, we praise you in the midst of the congregation. Bring us your glory, and teach us to follow you. Amen.*

This has been a rough week for many of us.

I have heard and read more stories from survivors of sexual assault in the past week than I did when going through training at a domestic violence response center a number of years ago.

Many people – particularly women – are re-living the most traumatic events of their lives, because of news headlines and dismissive comments from politicians and the press.

Many people – particularly women – are finding the courage to speak up about their experiences, in hopes that making their trauma public can keep others safe from the same fate.

Many people – particularly men – are making fun of those women, dismissing their truths, blaming them for being attacked, and twisting their stories to focus on the men and not the women.

It's a rough place to be, especially for women and for survivors of assault.

And so we come to church, hoping for some word of comfort or justice or love to carry us through.

But the assigned Scriptures for today provide little help, at face value.

Genesis 2 tells us that woman was made from man, and was created for man.

This passage has been used in so many harmful ways over the centuries, to justify the subjugation of women to men.

People have frequently used Genesis 2 as proof that God intended marriage to be between one man and one woman – prohibiting same-sex marriage as well as polygamy, though of course the Bible is rife with examples of men married to multiple women.

These words have been weaponized against female bodies, in the same way that news headlines have been in recent days. For those of us inhabiting female bodies today, the story of God creating a woman *out of* a man and *for the sake of* a man doesn't seem to be good news.

OK, well, parts of the Hebrew Scriptures often come across as kind of judge-y to us. Maybe Jesus will have something life-giving to say today.

Um, nope.

The Gospel lesson seems to carry no more good news than Genesis.

If we were to take Jesus' words about divorce at face value, we would have to consider many people in this room today to be adulterers. Many more of us were raised by adulterers. Even more of us have close friends and siblings and children who are committing adultery, by Jesus' standards.

I don't like his standards. But who am I to disagree with Jesus?

And really, where *is* the good news in all this?

In a week where victims have been re-traumatized, women have been repeatedly discredited for no reason other than their gender, and a new justice has been appointed to the Supreme Court over the objections of the American Bar Association, the National Council of Churches, and thousands of protestors – where is the good news?

Every so often, I reread a play by Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor. It's called *The Trial of God*. The main characters are Jews in Eastern Europe in the 1600s, about to face yet another pogrom, a genocidal massacre aimed at eliminating all Jews from the region.

The characters blame God for their plight. If God truly loves people, then how can God let pogroms continue to happen? They decide to put God on trial for crimes against humanity. God could have saved human life, but chose not to. For that, the characters believe that God is guilty.

The refrain throughout the story is, "Where is God in all of this?" In the accusations, in the stories of survivors, in the pogroms themselves – where is God when bad things happen?

The answer – both for the characters in this story and for us today – the answer is that God is with those who suffer.

When we humans commit genocide, it is God we are killing.

When men assault women, it is God they are raping.

When people with power oppress those who have none, they are oppressing God.

Where is God in all this?

God is with the victim. Always.

When we understand this, today's Scripture lessons start to sound more like good news.

God is with the woman, the survivor, the person who is oppressed, the person who is lonely.

And moreover, the followers of God have an obligation to care for these people.

In Jesus' time, a divorced woman had no source of income or protection aside from begging or prostitution. By telling men that they couldn't simply divorce a woman because she burned their dinner, Jesus was protecting the underdog.

It would be a stretch to say that the first human was oppressed, but he certainly was lonely. Ultimately, God created a second human because the first one needed a companion. God understood the pain of loneliness, and fixed it for the human.

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the human to be alone."

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, for the kingdom of God belongs to people like this."

Humankind needs community.

That's the underlying theme behind both the Genesis and Mark texts today. More than marriage or divorce or sexuality, these passages are about the importance of community.

And Jesus uses the best example ever.

He told his disciples that the kingdom of heaven belongs to little children.

Now, we have some very little children in our congregation, who have been born in the past 4 months, and I'd like to invite them forward to give us a visual of the point that Jesus was trying to make.

Take a look at this baby. If the parent left the baby just sitting there, by the Communion rail, could that baby do anything about it?

How would the baby get food?

What would happen if they wet themselves?

A little child could not survive without a community of folks to support them.

Children can't care for themselves, they rely on others – and that's why little children are such a good example for the disciples and for us.

It is to people such as this that the kingdom of heaven belongs.

In other words, this baby is closer to God than any of the rest of us in the room today. If we want to draw closer to God, we can do so by caring for people such as this.

The kingdom of God belongs to little children, to people who are oppressed or lonely, and to people who cannot care for themselves.

We approach the reign of God when we prioritize the community above the self, when we look out for the needs of others, and when we care for the oppressed.

We approach the kingdom of God when we recognize that we need other people in our own lives in order to get by.

Because, while very few of us are as helpless as that baby is right now, none of us can survive without others.

We *need* farmers and doctors and auto mechanics.

We *need* construction workers and plumbers and teachers.

We *need* a community in order to survive.

It is not good for us to be alone.

And so we come here, to church, to find some semblance of good news.

And even at the end of a tough week, or couple of weeks – even when the Bible readings sound oppressive at first – even when we struggle to find good news – in this community, we can begin to experience the reign of God.

In this community, we can care for others – we can smile at the small child in the pew in front of us, and even give the parent a break by taking the kid out when they just can't sit still any more. We can visit those who are sick or homebound. We can make donations of time and food and fabric and money to help other people. We can participate in education and advocacy events that teach us new ways to live out our faith in the world.

We can embody the truth that Jesus preaches, that no one deserves to be kicked to the curb, but all of God's children are valuable and ought to be respected and honored by others.

Humankind needs community.

It is not good for us to be alone.

It *is* good for us to continue to engage in church and society, to help other people, to be sure that folks are heard and honored and respected and believed.

God expects us to care for widows and orphans, prisoners and foreigners, for babies and the elderly and all of humankind.

Let the little children come to Jesus... and the survivors, and the oppressed people, and the refugees, and those who society wants to cast aside. *They* are the ones to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs.

Amen.