

## **Women's and Children's Rights**

**Mark 10:13-16; Luke 10:38-42**

### **Preparation**

Prepare a worship/reflection space with a picture, sculpture, or other object(s) that remind us of children or of the service and ministry of women. You may wish to print out this picture.

### **Pray the following prayer or a prayer of your own choosing:**

*O God who came to us  
as an infant,  
give us young hearts today.  
Give us the curiosity  
of children.  
Help us see the world  
with fresh eyes.  
Help us dream again  
of better years ahead of us.  
Bless us with the gift  
of surprise,  
the capacity for awe.  
Remove the cloudy veil  
of past disappointment  
that dims our vision  
of the future  
and limits our imagination.  
Speak to us today.  
Open our hearts to your better world.  
Teach us to hope.  
Amen.*



### **Read Mark 10:13-16**

### **Discuss the following questions:**

Why do you think people were bringing little children to Jesus?

Why might the disciples have wanted to stop people from bringing children to Jesus?

What was the social status of children in families during the time of the Roman empire? If you have an internet link, click on [this brief summary](#) on pbs.org.

What do you think Jesus means when he says, “it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs”?

What does it mean to receive the kingdom of God “as a little child”?

Look at the verses that immediately follow these verses (Mark 10:17-26). How, if at all, do these verses relate to our passage about little children?

## Read Luke 10:38-42

### Discuss the following questions:

Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher as well as a healer. Teachers had pupils, disciples. How do you think people in Jesus’s time would have reacted to the idea that a woman could be a rabbinical student?

Martha thinks its wrong that Mary is sitting at Jesus’s feet, listening to him teach. Why does Martha think that’s wrong?

Jesus says Martha is “worried and distracted” by “many things” -- or more literally, “much service.” What does he mean by that? What are the “things,” what is the “service” Martha is doing?

In this situation, which sister is doing “women’s work,” as people in Jesus’s time would have thought of the proper work of women and men?

Why does Jesus say that Martha is “worried and distracted by much service,” but Mary “has chosen the better part”?

What, if anything, is Jesus saying about the expected roles of women and men?



School children at Bolenge

### Family values in the reign of God

Today’s passages are small vignettes in larger narratives that illustrate the surprising values that apply in the alternate reality Jesus calls “the kingdom of God.” The Roman imperial world was a “man’s world.” The household was firmly under the control of the “father of the family,” the senior male who literally had the right to make life and death decisions within his domain. Wives had limited power, always subject to the authority of the husband. Children could be disowned, given into slavery, even exposed to die after birth if the father thought that was best for the family. Women and children were not

mere “property” -- at least in the case of free people -- but their rights were limited, sometimes severely so.

Our two stories today are windows into Jesus’s subversive understanding of how social relations are transformed in God’s reality now emerging, even as the Roman empire held such apparently overwhelming sway. The family values of God’s empire were very different than the family values of imperial Rome.

The first story is as interesting for its placement in the larger narrative of Mark as it is for its content. Immediately before the teaching about children, Jesus addresses a question about divorce. At issue is the Mosaic law allowing men to divorce their wives. It’s important to understand the social-economic consequences of divorce for women and their children. Unlike most marriages in North America today, marriage in the ancient world (and in many cultures today) was a contract between families, normally arranged by the fathers of the bride and groom. Feelings of love and affection might well develop over time, but they were not the point of marriage. People normally didn’t wed their “soul mates” for romance.

Marriages involved wealth transfers -- dowries and bride-prices -- and were arranged to secure or increase the wealth and social prestige of the birth families of the couple. Though women were highly valued for their child-bearing potential, they certainly had less social and economic power in the marriage. They had a lot more to lose in a divorce, in terms of economic security and social status.

Jesus is asked whether divorce is permitted. The straightforward answer is “yes” (see Deut 24:1-4). The Bible is crystal clear about this. But Jesus makes a surprise move. Pulling from two different scriptures that have nothing whatsoever to do with divorce to make his argument, Jesus says that the straightforward, literal meaning of the scripture that addresses divorce is wrong. Sure, “the Bible said it,” and you may well believe it, and that may well settle it for you, but the Bible is just plain wrong on this point, as the Bible itself proves if we pay close attention to other scriptures that have nothing at all to do with divorce, but in fact are completely pertinent! It’s really kind of an amazing way to read scripture. Jesus cites Genesis 1:27 -- God made human beings “male and female” (in the image of God) -- and pairs that with the end of Genesis 2 -- “for this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Mark 10:7-8). The conclusion Jesus draws from this pairing of scriptures that don’t even talk about divorce is that God doesn’t want men to cast off their wives any more than I would want to chop off my arm, though the Bible explicitly and undeniably allows men to do divorce their wives with a simple public proclamation. The literal and



Global Ministries Africa Executive Sandra Gourdet and US and Canada Disciples General Minister and President Sharon Watkins walk with children beside the Congo River in Bolenge

directly applicable passage falls before the fundamental logic of the two passages that technically don't talk about divorce, but are nevertheless relevant. The law governing divorce, Jesus says, was an accommodation made "because of the hardness of your hearts" (Mark 10:5). So the broader principles of the scriptures override the literal meaning of the scripture that directly addresses the issue raised.

Then, invoking the values of their "honor-shame" culture, Jesus shames men who want to exercise their biblically-granted permission to divorce their wives, saying that they will commit adultery when they remarry -- and that, typically, was the whole point of divorce. Even worse for an honor-bound male householder, they will cause their ex-wives to commit adultery if they remarry -- as, of course, the divorced wives must try to do for the sake of their own economic survival and that of their children. The threat of divorce, with its devastating consequences for women and their children, gave men very powerful leverage in the marriage relationship. Jesus just took that away. Though Roman law and biblical law allow it, in the reign of God, men cannot condemn their wives to economic destitution. They are "shameful" and dishonorable if they do so. They violate the logic of the scriptures, though the letter permits them to do so.

The economics of marriage are different today, especially for those of us who live in the US and Canada, and the laws governing divorce are dramatically more favorable to otherwise vulnerable women and children. But the underlying biblical principles continue to be relevant: inequality of gender power reinforced by cultural tradition violates God's intention for the world. In God's reign, the vulnerable are not threatened. The insecure find protection and freedom.

Immediately after the story about the children, Jesus has a conversation with a man who apparently wants to become his disciple. At the end of the conversation, Mark makes the striking comment that "Jesus loved him" (v 21). Then Jesus says, "you lack only thing: go sell what you own and give it to the poor, and then you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me" (v 21). With deep sorrow, the man turns and leaves because, Mark tells us, he was very wealthy (v 22). Jesus then offers an absurd image to explain what just happened: "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for someone who is rich to go into the kingdom of God" (v 25). In the alternate reality Jesus calls "the kingdom" or reign of God, great disparities of power and wealth have no place. Rich people who are unable to imagine life without their enormous wealth will not be willing to participate.

Our story about the children is cradled in-between the teaching on divorce and the conversation with the wealthy would-be disciple, two vignettes that illustrate the unusual values of the "kingdom of God." When we play by God's rules, the power of the powerful and the wealth of the wealthy are



Women historically have been strong leaders in the Disciples community in Congo. In recent years, women have pursued theological education and are serving as ordained ministers. A woman recently has been appointed PSP, the Congolese equivalent of regional minister or conference pastor.

shared, dispersed for the benefit of the vulnerable. This broader narrative context illuminates the episode with the children and makes sense of Jesus's comment about them -- children, who in the ancient household were the least powerful and most vulnerable of all: "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" (vv 14-15). Living by God's rules means surrendering the power to dominate, giving up the control of money to get your way. Following the way of Jesus means sharing power and wealth to empower and sustain the world's most vulnerable.

In the second story from Luke 10, Jesus comes to the home of two sisters and begins to teach. It's interesting that this household is headed by a woman -- "a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home" (v 38) -- an unusual social arrangement in a Roman imperial world built from top to bottom on the "*pater familias*," the household of the father.

Jesus begins to teach. Martha is "worried and distracted by many things" (literally, 'much service'), while Mary sits like a student at Jesus's feet. Martha is, of course, doing the work that traditionally



fell to women in a household. She's attending to the needs and comfort of the men. This, of course, is honorable and necessary work. Martha is understandably irked that her sister is not sharing the work load. She complains to Jesus about her sister's irresponsible behavior. Jesus does not devalue Martha's labor, but he does comment on the fact that she is "worried and distracted" by it (v 41). He then defends Mary, praising her for choosing to be a rabbinical student, typically a role for young men.

In the two stories today, Jesus illustrates the radically different values of God's reign that is, even now, transforming a world still burdened with the imperial values of inequality and vast disparities of wealth. Children and women, so often living in vulnerable circumstances, are lifted up as models of the new world God is bringing in our midst. In God's reign, the powerless are empowered and the vulnerable find security and hope.

### **Empowering women and children in Congo**

The Disciples community in Congo has long supported excellent schools for boys and girls, for example, the Congolese Christian Institute in Bolenge. The church is currently engaged in the [Education for Girls in the Equator Region project](#) and needs financial support to fund it. Several schools are participating in the project, including the Lycee Nsangea Ndotsi Girls Secondary School in Mbandaka. Nsangea Ndotsi means "good news." This boarding school provides education for girls in a non-harassing environment. Unfortunately, the war has left many families unable to pay for boarding

schools. Some funds from the Education for Girls project goes toward tuition, room, and board -- \$100 pays for one girl for one year, \$50 pays for a semester.

The United Nations Children's Fund reports that children, especially girls, often don't go to school or stay in school because their families have to pay for educational supplies such as pens, notebooks, textbooks, meals, and fees. The Education for Girls project will also help pay for school supplies so more families can afford to send their children to school.

Studies by the UN have shown that the single most important way to eradicate poverty and promote social stability is to educate girls and economically empower women. Lack of education exacerbates poverty and increases the incidence of HIV/AIDS and prostitution. Empowering women and educating girls offer the best hope for promoting stability and peace. The educational ministry of the Disciples community in Congo, with its special emphasis on the education of girls, offers healing and hope in a country still struggling to recover from the devastations of imperial exploitation and war. Promoting the gospel vision of a new world that plays by God's rules, the church is helping demolish barriers of impoverishment, harassment, and gender discrimination, as God's reign comes ever more near.

**Conclude with the following prayer or a prayer of your own choosing:**

*O God of justice and equality,*

*You break down barriers  
and bring down walls.*

*You welcome the vulnerable  
to a seat of honor,  
a place of security.*

*Help us risk  
our power and wealth  
for your healing mission  
in the world.*

*Help us come  
as children  
into your household.*

*Help us sit as students  
at the feet of Jesus,  
our teacher.*

*Give us the courage  
to play by your rules,  
to live with your values  
of equality, security, and empowerment  
for all.*

*In the name of Jesus,  
Amen.*

**For the complete bible study series please visit**

**[www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html](http://www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html)**