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Bull's Eye
Mark 10:2-16

Last Sunday I mentioned a common way to define sin as missing the mark, from a Greek word associated with an archery term — failing to get the arrow in the middle, spot on.

Missing the mark in archery may be no biggie, but in real life, missing the mark can have grave consequences. Or, it could mean getting close but not quite centered. What did Jesus think?

Here we have him being quizzed by others. Lots of people asked him questions, and some of the questions were meant to trap him; others came from earnest inquiry.

It was common for Jesus to be interrogated by religious people to see if he could answer rightly. The way he answered questions *may* provide us insight in answering the question — what does Jesus think about sin.

Many miserable people in bad marriages want to know what this passage means for them. Especially given the emphasis in Christian circles on the term “biblical marriage.” I know plenty of people who stayed in terrible marriages because they were taught that divorce was forbidden them.

By the way, biblical marriages meant polygamy, with tacit acceptance of concubines. In first century Judaism, it was lawful for a man to be with multiple women, just not *married* women.

Let's get back to how Jesus answered questions. I want to extend a hypothesis to you — an interpretive lens. Jesus says in the Gospel of John¹ he is united with the divine: “I and Father are one.” I'd like to use that as the lens from which we extrapolate his entire reason for being, his *raison d'être*. The point of the human experience is union with the divine.

That's how we got here, at our beginning — from union, and that's how we'll end up. Our days are spent approximating, learn to live into that

¹John 10:30

reality; shall we say again, consenting to it, to the really-real - what Jesus referred to as “the kingdom of heaven.” The kingdom of heaven is when we’re one with the divine. Or, in Christian language, one in Christ.

I submit to you that Jesus answers questions with this premise in mind. His answers point to an emphasis on union. And sometimes we have a hard time hearing it because we spend a lot of life defining ourselves by what we are not - we are not like “them,” “those” people, “that” political party. We cling to division to make ourselves think we are better or right or more religious. But permit me creative license to paraphrase Jesus when asked questions —

“What do we do to inherit the kingdom?” Union.

*By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?*² Union.

A lawyer asked: *And who is my neighbor?*³ Union.

The disciples: *Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*⁴ Union with the least of these.

*How is it that you, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?*⁵ Union.

Pontius Pilate: *Are you the king of the Jews? What is truth?*⁶ Union.

Union with the divine is the spiritual life. And we don’t exactly control it, we don’t work for it, grace comes to us, but we *do* consent to union. After all, what is union if coerced or forced? Union happens because God draws near, desiring us. Is always there, of course, closer than our own breath. According to Matthew 25’s last parable, union with others is union with the divine.

²Matt. 21:23; also, Mark 11:27-33; Luke 20:1-8

³Luke 10:29

⁴Matt. 18:1

⁵John 4:9

⁶John 18:33, John 18:38

The bull's eye image implies that we try to get an arrow perfectly centered by our own effort, by trying to be perfect, or pure, or religious. The image Jesus offers includes our consent, **but, it is** more about waking us up to what is already available to us *despite our efforts*. The really real is that we're already in the bosom of God, only we have to wake up to it. Jesus constantly talks about having eyes to see, ears to see, giving sight to the blind, resurrecting us to the already-ness of union.

This brings us to our story today. About divorce. The ideal has already been established in the Torah. Union of two people — two become one. That's the ideal. Jesus insists on the ideal, and then some. To the rich man, *"Okay, if you've already followed all the commandments, sell all you have."* Basically, Jesus wants union for this young ruler, which is harder to experience with the trappings of wealth, because wealth distances us from the ones we say we are not. *It's easier for the camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom.* Gulp. Jesus consistently sets the bar high. His disciples complain - *Who, then, can be saved? He responds: [What is impossible for human is possible for God.](#)*⁷

The bull's-eye, if we use that image at all, is consenting to what already is. Seeing. Our original state was unity, and that is what we return to; in the meantime, we practice here, we get glimpses and approximations. When it happens, time collapses if only for a second. With a sunset or a dog, with an infant or a lover, this temporary state of unity with what is, **the really real**, puts us in touch with hope. If we can experience it here, how much more vast will our experience be when we know it in full.

The kingdom of heaven: here, yet, not yet. That's how Jesus described it. It's at hand, but partial. If it weren't so, we wouldn't be witnessing racism, cruelty, conflict, divorce. The ideal would be realized.

Marriage is a prototype. Two become one. Paul gives us another image - all of us together considered the body of Christ, all parts essential, indispensable, the most humble part as important as the brain or heart.

You simply can't be united with God and sin. Not sinning is union with God. That is why our doctrine calls Jesus "without sin." He was one with

⁷ Luke 18:25-27

divinity, making him sinless. But for Jesus it wasn't **about him**. It was about what it was about for **all of Jewish history** — Israel would be chosen to be a blessing to all the nations. Followers of Jesus, healed, saved, united, **to be a blessing**. United with God, uniting us to others. That is what we do in Holy Communion, we unite with Christ and one another, literally and in spirit, fed to feed.

We can reject purity, perfection and even good deeds in defining the bull's eye. The bull's eye of union radiates from the center outward, making our life not a challenge with darts but like a sound that reverberates. It's Tony visiting Ralph, not just because Tony is Tony, but because in that moment, even briefly, they are one. It is Silas Bird handing Penny his coins, then every kid doing the same. It's not to look good. It's not even to **be** good. It's two becoming one if just for a tiny moment and we see God.

Why does the music matter so much to us? All the distinction, each voice, not dissolved but harmonized and becoming one with the music. We feel the truth of that, and it connects us to the point of it all: Union without the dissolution of identity.

The kin-dom of heaven is not a doctrine to be proclaimed as if an answer to a question, then you get a point, or a privilege. The kin-dom is an experience, happening all the time, reminding us that the target, like a bull's eye, is unity, only, the source of the unity comes to us, we don't need a bow or arrows. In those experiences, there is no sin. We also have the beautiful doctrine of the Trinity, which is a union of three without the reduction or eclipsing of any of the three. The divine dance - Father, Son, Holy Spirit, creative and interdependent, not static.

Joseph who was engaged to Mary — when he becomes aware of the pregnancy, was willing to divorce her quietly, as to not shame her. And this was considered by his tradition an honorable thing to do. He didn't, but if he had, it would have been acceptable. Divorce indeed is a failure of the ideal. And a lot of life, unfortunately, is failure. We fail and miss the mark all the time. That's how we learn.

This story from Mark ends with a reference to children. We must become like them to enter the kingdom. They aren't perfect, they aren't always good:), but they **are** enraptured by the really-real. They look for the ideal. They are open enough to listen, and learn. They are wide-eyed with trust.

We can imagine them now, gathered on the lap of Jesus, receiving a blessing: Be still, and know that I am God. In that moment, the kin-dom at hand.

Amen.