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First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
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To Such As These
(third in series, *Treasures of the Church*)

Ministry group recognized: Women Empowered and Blessed/Guild

No where in the Bible is it recorded that Jesus ever married and had children. Whatever reasons we might surmise for Jesus' apparent bachelorhood we ought never to conclude that he was somehow averse to women and children. Over and over in the gospel stories we encounter his particular sensitivity to them. There is the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, the healing of Jairus' daughter, the healing of the woman with the issue of blood, Jesus' friendship with the sisters Mary and Martha who sent for him upon the death of their brother Lazarus. We know of Jesus' closeness to his mother when he provided for her from the cross with the care and protection of the apostle John. And let us never forget that the first person to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection was Mary Magdalene in the garden.

Neither should we conclude from this that Jesus was somehow uncertain around men. His traveling band of disciples was all twelve men, the majority of whom were of the large muscle vocation of fishing. I get more the feeling that Jesus was of what might be considered the well balanced personality type that enjoys its own gender characteristics as well as those which might often be considered the provenance of the other.

We are not told why the Pharisees came up to him one day and asked him about divorce. Were they feeling guilty about how they were themselves treating women? Were they testing his gender loyalty? Perhaps they were nervous about him. Perhaps they detected in him something which if it had its way would dramatically shift the power distribution within society. Indeed, if that was their concern it was well justified. Divorce was then something which was almost exclusively at the discretion of the husband, and if a woman was divorced she could be without income, without place or position, even destitute. If we think it difficult for a woman at any time in the history of our own society to fend for herself it was so much more so in ancient Israel. Men there had a lot of power over women, especially those in the man's own family.

The response of Jesus to the Pharisees question is harsh. It had to be. It concerned the least in the social order, the one's who most needed a fair shake. At that time a man could divorce his wife for almost any reason. Jesus condemned that, and

disallowed divorce for almost any reason. For Jesus, men needed to man-up to their responsibilities to care for those who were the most vulnerable. In addition to the romantic commitment involved in marriage at that time there was so much more.

Jesus' teaching on divorce is immediately followed in Mark's gospel with the narrative of some people bringing children to Jesus for his blessing. Children were another vulnerable group in that society. The disciples tried to stop the parents from bringing their children to Jesus, thinking perhaps that he did not have time for the needs of children. Maybe the disciples thought that the brilliant teacher was not able to get down on the level of children. If so, the disciples could not have been more wrong. *It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs*, Jesus said. *Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. (Mark 10:16)* Not only could Jesus get down on the level of children, he was in some ways on their level all the time, and everyone else who wanted to experience the joy of God would need to be on their level as well.

When the church of Jesus Christ has been true to its calling it has always taken the part of the most vulnerable among us, the one's without status, the ones without money, the one's without a safe haven. Over recent centuries in the United States, those in the church who heard the words of Jesus and took them to heart would work and witness first for the freedom of the slave and lead the way in the civil rights struggle ever since. Many people in the churches would work for women's suffrage and equality and for the passage of child labor laws. Even the witness of the Christian Temperance Union which led eventually to prohibition, unworkable as that proved to be, was motivated by those who grieved the destitution of whole families that resulted from alcoholism.

In August Debbie and I visited Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn, New York. Plymouth Church expanded rapidly under the leadership of Henry Ward Beecher during the years leading up to the civil war. The present building was erected during Beecher's tenure in order accommodate the increasing crowds which sought to worship there on Sunday mornings. Henry Ward was the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe (who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and the son of Lyman Beecher who was the pastor of our church in Litchfield, Connecticut where Henry and Harriet were raised. Unknown to many people at the time, Henry included in the architecture of the new Plymouth Church a secret cellar which served as a stop on the Underground Railroad. Fugitive slaves would be hidden there until under cover of darkness they could be safely transported to the East River where they would be concealed on vessels until they entered free Canada. What Beecher and some members of Plymouth Congregational did in this regard was quite illegal. After Debbie and I worshipped there with the now much smaller congregation (Plymouth is struggling now as are other downtown congregations in the United States) we were given a tour of the building which included a trek down into the cellar and the still remaining secret rooms of the Underground Railroad station there. We

were filled with awe, to see what a courageous Christian pastor and congregation could do for God and the most vulnerable.

Today the work continues through the United Church of Christ with refugee resettlement, immigration reform — including sensitivity even to those families a member of which is here illegally and would be split apart by the deporting of a father or mother, affordable basic health care for everyone, gay rights, disaster relief, and world wide hunger and poverty relief — sometimes through direct material aid and sometimes through missions such as micro economics which loans small amounts to third world entrepreneurs to start a small business. To take the part of the least of these as Jesus called the most vulnerable in the world is not always popular, sometimes controversial, sometimes even proven mistaken over time, but it is always an attempt to answer the call of Jesus and meet the needs of the least among us, those who might be considered a bother by others.

All of us are soon to be welcomed here at the table of love. All of us who seek to be touched by the Living Christ can have a seat. No matter what life issues we bring, no matter what needs, we are not a bother to God. Not here, not now, not ever. And if we are wise, if we are really mature, we will look here into the eyes of Jesus with the trust of child and know the secret of life.