

The Beauty of God's Plan

A few years ago, a then 37 year-old Karen Gaffney spoke at a TEDx talk in Portland, OR. She has traveled the world giving motivational speeches. She speaks about her experience of overcoming many challenges in order to succeed in long-distance swimming: she swam the English Channel, Lake Tahoe in 59-degree water, and the "escape Alcatraz" swim. Karen lives with her parents, shares the cooking, cleaning, and other routine household tasks. One thing I have not mentioned is that Karen Gaffney has Down Syndrome.

Karen is an example and inspiration that each of us can live our lives with meaning regardless of what challenges or limitations we face. She can also help to change our ideas about what it means to live with Down Syndrome, today. Let's look at God's Word.

In our first reading, we hear that God looked upon Adam in his solitude and declared creation not yet good. In this creation story, man is created first and then everything else for him. Yet, what the man truly needed was a way to lay down this splendid self-sufficiency and invest his life in another, and experience a communion or souls, like that existing within the Trinity. The unity that Adam and Eve were to experience was based both on likeness and difference (complementarity). Figuratively speaking, Adam becomes vulnerable, surrendering part of the protective shell that covers his heart. Man is to leave his childhood behind, cleave to his wife, and make a family, the basis for nurturing and valuing each new human life.

When Adam disobeys God's Word, the resulting "hardness of his heart" inevitably lead to a disruption of the unity that God intended for man and woman. When the Pharisees questioned Jesus about divorce, they asked whether it was "lawful". Of course, it was lawful, then as now. Instead, Jesus answered a different question: Not whether it is lawful but whether this painful rupture is God's will for us. The answer is "no". How people and the Church deal practically with this painful paradox that divorce is inevitable for a fallen humanity but deeply against God's loving intention, is complicated.

What we can say is that God's will is that marriage be harmonious and for life, bestowing the blessing on children of basking in their parents' love as they lay down self-centeredness. Jesus shows us that this is clearly a grace that only God

can give – with our cooperation. In our humanness we stumble and fall short of God's original loving intention but there is always the way of repentance.

In Matthew's longer version of this teaching, Jesus also explains a second way that we can experience communion and be fruitful: single, celibate life lived for the sake of the Kingdom of God. These two vocations, marriage of man and woman and single celibate life offer Christians two paths to communion and to holiness. The Church honors both paths and attributes equal worth to both.

Today's Gospel concludes with Jesus welcoming the little children. Their parents wanted Jesus to touch and thereby to bless them. What an amazing and beautiful thing, when parents want Jesus to touch their childrens' lives! There is no greater gift that they can give, no greater legacy. The disciples got it all wrong and shooed them away. As if children are somehow less important to God! As if God would see their lives as less worthwhile, less important to the Kingdom! Jesus shatters these human assumptions about what is valuable and doing so models for us a way that we make room in our lives for those who need our help and depend on us. As the reading from Hebrews reminds us, Jesus Himself made himself small, lower than the angels, in order to bring many brother and sisters to glory, us, His adopted brothers and sisters.

What can we learn from all of this? God's Word - and from Karen Gaffney and her parents? We can learn how to live life meaningfully by acknowledging our dependence on God and each another and by embracing those who depend on us.