

People were bringing children to him to touch
By Geoff Wood

Until recent times a wife had few rights. According to William Blackstone's commentaries on English Law – written in the 17th century – once married, *the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage. A married woman could not own property, sign legal documents or enter into a contract, obtain an education against her husband's wishes, or keep a salary for herself*. . . and so on, according to what I read under the heading of Coverture on the Internet. It's in relation to this subjugation of the wife to her husband that Mr. Bumble (who is hopelessly *dominated* by his wife) makes that famous remark (in *Oliver Twist*): *If the law supposes that, the law is a ass – a idiot*.

Which brings us to the issue of legal disputes. The Pharisees seem always to want to dispute issues of law. Today they test Jesus' attitude toward marriage. Moses allowed divorce for certain reasons. What does Jesus say? Jesus says Moses relaxed the permanence of marriage because, given the way people behave, it was hard to maintain. But the ideal of a life-long union of mutual love and support remains in place - at least as Mark's Gospel remembers. Yet Matthew's later Gospel does allow an exception and so begins among Christians a history of loose ends; for example, the custom of annulments for acceptable reasons (except for a refusal in the case of Henry VIII which resulted in the departure of England and everything British from the fold of Peter – a price that cost the Church and Christendom in general enormously).

I think it can be safe to say the tendency of Jesus was not to argue points of law but to look directly into a person's eyes and see someone who needed love, affirmation; needed to see the face of God not as legislator but as the most caring Being you would want to meet – that whatever your "score card" might say about you; it was the imperfect people he enjoyed and not so much those who had straight A's. Somewhat like our old pastor Jack O'Hare whom many a once guilt-ridden parishioner cherishes to this day.

Which may be the reason why Mark in today's Gospel has Jesus quickly shift our attention to the arrival of children amid these lawyers. His disciples want to chase them off and Jesus says in effect: Don't chase them away – for they are the very metaphor I need to shift from this tangle of legalities to what my Gospel is really about.

It's about becoming children again, by that I mean recovering what is characteristic of children, even of yourself when you were a child. Children don't start out nitpicking over what's right and what's wrong. They are too fascinated by the world into which they have been born, one surprise after another; and we feed them one surprise after another as for instance the colorful wrappings we place under a Christmas Tree. Their imaginations are still wide open, quick to experience things in ways litigious adults have forgotten from the first buttercup they see (while they are still crawling in the grass) to the fairy tales we ourselves never forget to the stained glass windows of my childhood church one of which depicted Jesus walking on the water! Wow! It is into this realm of divine wonder that Jesus would guide us – and not back to issues for which there will forever be a pro and a con to divide the human race – often to its very destruction.