

“Family Matters”
Pentecost 18b Proper 22
Mark 10:2-16

Pastor Bruce K Modahl
Grace Lutheran Church
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In Jesus' Name.

Mark tells us some Pharisees came to test Jesus. The word “test” informs us from the start they were not sincere in asking Jesus whether or not it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. They already have their minds made up. The person giving the test knows the answer. The test giver wants to know if you know it. At that time there was a lively debate about divorce. Folks lined up on one of two sides of the issue the same way today people line up on questions about sexuality, abortion, the death penalty, and so forth.

Jesus answered their question by asking, “What did Moses command you?” They referred to Deuteronomy 24. It says a man may write a certificate of divorce for his wife, “...if he has found some indecency in her.” One group put the emphasis on indecency and claimed it meant adultery was the only grounds for divorce. Another group responded, “If Moses meant adultery he would have said adultery.” And there is a bit of wiggle room for how one understands the word translated indecency. It can just as easily mean “objectionable.” So it would read “...if he has found anything objectionable about her.” That would make divorce legal on any whim or for any reason.

We can safely assume the Pharisees have thrown in their lot with the more conservative of these interpretations. The Pharisees knew Jesus to be soft on family values. Everyone had heard about the incident recorded back in chapter 3. Some people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” The scribes said, “He has the devil in him.” His family was worried about him. So his mother and siblings came to the house where he was staying. It was standing room only in there with people listening as Jesus taught. They sent in word, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” Instead of going outside to his family, Jesus responded, “‘Who are my mother and brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brother and my sister.’” With those family values the Pharisees were certain Jesus was a libertine on the divorce issue. That will help to discredit him as a teacher of Israel.

In good rabbinic fashion Jesus answers scripture with scripture. That is our principle as well. Scripture interprets scripture. Too often this has degenerated to firing Bible bullets at each

other, both sides with their minds made up and using scripture as a weapon. That is not what Jesus did and it is not what we are to do when we use Scripture to interpret Scripture. First, Jesus commented on the condition of their hearts. They had a condition he called *cardiosclerosis*, meaning hard hearts. Jesus said that is why Moses gave such a law. Jesus then quoted from our first reading today, from Genesis chapter 2. “From the beginning of creation,” he said, “God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife.’ So,” he concludes, “they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

With that Jesus shifted the ground out from under the Pharisees. They based their argument on the law. Jesus moved the discussion to creation and God’s intention. God intended marriage as a gift. Furthermore it was a gift that answered a need. The problem stated in Genesis was Adam’s loneliness. Did you catch that detail in the first reading? The whole reason God created all the animals in the field and all the birds of the air was because the man was lonely. God paraded the whole menagerie in front of Adam and gave him naming rights over the lot of them. Now Adam had plenty of company. However, not one of them resolved Adam’s loneliness. From the same human stuff out of which the man was created, God created the woman. God gave them to each other as gift.

After the fall God put a fence around the gift to protect it for us. The fall refers to Adam and Eve’s sin. It was more of an upward fall, however.¹ That’s because it came about when they put themselves in God’s place, deciding for themselves what was good or bad for them, rather than trusting God. After the fall God fenced the gift with law for our own good. “You shall not commit adultery.” “You shall not steal the affections of your neighbor’s spouse.” “You shall not even covet your neighbor’s spouse.” Almost from the moment those fences were set in place people began plotting, “How can I get around it? How is it this law doesn’t apply to me in my circumstances so that I can climb over or snake under these fences?” We witness as much in the Pharisees. They are interested in what the law allows a person to do and still be righteous. A discussion on what the law allows quickly becomes a discussion of “what can I get away with?” It is a question we face every time we check the discrepancy between the posted speed limit and what the speedometer tells us. I heard a story on the radio about a police officer driving an

¹ The phrase “upward fall” originates, I believe, with Paul Bretscher.

unmarked car when another car blew by him. The officer speeded up and slowly caught up to the speeding car and crept into the blind spot off his right rear bumper. The officer paced him going 95 mph. He then dropped back, pulled in behind him, turned on his lights, and pulled him over. The man was furious. “You cannot have caught me speeding,” the man said. “I spent \$500 on the best radar detector on the market.” He indicated the device stuck to his windshield. The officer replied, “I did not catch you speeding using radar. I paced you. It just so happens radar detectors are illegal in this jurisdiction so in addition to this ticket I am confiscating your radar detection device.” We look for ways around the law. Sometimes the law nabs us.

That is also what we do with the law we get from God. God gives it for our common good. We work it for our self-interest. We use it as a ladder to assert our righteousness over others. By our very nature, our very fallen nature that is the way we end up using the law. The true nature of such self-righteous maneuvering is revealed in the midst, not of a debate about divorce, but, in the midst of divorce. There we see how destructive is the will to be right, of law used only for the sake of getting the advantage, not to minimize the harm done but to win, to come out on top no matter the cost to bystanders like the children.

When Jesus continued the discussion with the disciples in the house, he closed off any avenue to use the law to claim righteousness. Any divorce and remarriage causes sorrow and hurt. All the explaining and excuse making in the world does nothing to counter the aroma of failure. I have one family member who never told his son that he was married before. To maintain the secret he had to limit any exposure to his side of the family. He was hyper-critical of those who were divorced. What must he have thought about himself? Jesus, with his brief comments to his disciples, cuts off for us any self-justifying argument. Divorce puts us on the wrong side of what God intends for marriage.

The Pharisees approached Jesus like lawyers negotiating a contract. We see where it got them. It put them in opposition to God. And it is tiresome, all this legal wrangling, trying to prove, “I’m right and you’re wrong.”

There is an alternative to the Pharisees’ approach. The children offer a stark contrast. The children came to Jesus not to test him but to receive a blessing from him. That word “receive” is the same word in last week’s gospel reading that was translated welcome. The children came to Jesus to welcome a blessing from him. Jesus advised his disciples and all in hearing range (that

would include us) to welcome the kingdom of God as a child. Jesus is not making an argument for the innocence of children. A pastor baptized his daughter. He took the baby into his arms and gazed into her eyes and gushed “She’s perfect.” Well, if she was perfect there would be no need to bring her to the waters of baptism. Jesus is not making a case for innocence and certainly not advising childishness. What a child is most of all is dependent, and initially dependent for everything. So are we dependent for everything on God’s grace made known to us in Jesus. We depend on him for forgiveness for all of our failures, marital and otherwise. At the cross Jesus suffered the arrogance of our will to be right. And by his death and resurrection God declares us to be right, who have no righteousness of our own. We depend on Jesus for treatment of our cardiosclerosis. We depend on him for some heart softener. Indeed, his love transforms our hearts, softening them, making them pliant in obedience to God’s law. We got bent out of shape in the upward fall. However, baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection, the old rebel is put to death and our lives are reformed to the divine image. We depend on God for life, this day and eternally. All of that grace is in Jesus’ blessing to us, who come, as we will in a few minutes, like children, with open and empty hands.