

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 4, 2009
Pentecost 18
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 2:18-24
Psalm 128
Hebrews 2:1-8
Mark 10:1-9

Our Gospel lesson this morning finds Jesus in a familiar spot, and by that I don't mean the region of Judea East of the Jordan river, although that is indeed where he is. By familiar spot I mean Jesus finds himself in a situation where one group or another is trying to entice him, to trap him, to catch him in a position where he contradicts himself or the law that was given by Moses.

In many of these cases it is the Pharisees who are on the other end of the conversation, and that is what is occurring here.

Now the text tells us that the Pharisees want to "trap" Jesus with their question, and that is no doubt true. But we must understand a little bit about *why* this is the case.

The Pharisees have a great responsibility in the religious and social life of the people. They are the guardians of the law handed down by Moses, and they are responsible for interpreting and applying the law of Moses in concrete situations. They are tasked with the responsibility of making sure that the boundaries of the Torah are preserved. It is their job to ensure that the people build their lives around the sacred scriptures. In some ways, I suppose, their task was very similar

to what pastors and religious leaders do today. They seek to help people conform their lives to the principles of scripture.

Seen in this light, the Pharisees have legitimate reasons to be concerned about this new rabbi and teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. He seems to be careless and even indifferent to many of the things that are important to them, both ritually and scripturally.

As an example, earlier in this Gospel Jesus has radically redefined family to include “anyone who does the will of God” (3:35). And subsequent to our text today, Jesus will warn that following him may cause family divisions and may ultimately tear families apart (13:12-13).

So as the Pharisees approach Jesus here and ask him about divorce, the question is a trap, yes. The questioners’ motives are not entirely pure. But neither are they entirely evil. There is much at stake. The questioners want to know, at least in part, if Jesus really cares about the law given by Moses. They want to know whether Jesus is anti-family or pro-family.

And so they come. And they ask, “should a man be allowed to divorce his wife?”

This is rather underhanded, for they knew that the law allowed this. If Jesus says “no,” then they have caught him directly contradicting the law of Moses. If

he says “yes,” then they have gained his tacit approval of their own practice where the letter of the law might be followed, but its spirit violated.

This happened because under the statute a man needed only to serve his wife some written paperwork, and the divorce was as good as done. And over the years, situations developed where a man could do this over the tiniest of issues. In some cases when a man divorced his wife, she had no means of support and no family to support her. Her only option in those cases was prostitution. But hey, no law was violated, and everything was perfectly legal, right?

That’s the problem with the Pharisees’ question here. Notice the thrust of their question. They approach the issue merely from the *legal* perspective, but ignore the *moral* perspective. They want to know from Jesus the legality of divorce, but are not interested in its *moral* implications.

When I was in college, one of my professors was very fond of saying to us, “just because something may be *legal*, that doesn’t make it *right*.”

In some ways, Jesus’ answer here takes a similar approach. In answering their question, Jesus reframes the entire issue by taking things back to God’s original plan and design. He takes them back to Genesis, quoting how God’s design was that a man would leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two would become one.

In doing this, Jesus shows that divorce must be seen not within the context of legal rules, but within the context of *covenant relationships*. Before marriage is ever a legal contract it is first and foremost a *spiritual* covenant. It involves two individual lives made one by God's divine blessing. It is a relationship that involves respect and mutuality. It is a relationship, not a contract, and the rules take shape and are given birth from within the context of the relationship.

And with this answer, Jesus essentially blows the Pharisees out of the water, because their practice of upholding the letter of the law while violating its moral spirit is denounced for what it is. They are hung up on *rules*. God is interested in *relationships*. They are concerned with what the law *allows*. Jesus is concerned with what God *intends*.

The subject of this Gospel text then is not divorce, but marriage. To the Pharisees' question, "are you pro-divorce?" Jesus responds, "I am pro-marriage, because that has been God's plan from the beginning. Marriage, not divorce, best expresses God's will. And God's best intent is not negated or superseded by legal permissions."

But this places us in a quandary, because the fact of the matter is that marriage is being assaulted in our society with great force. In a "me-first" society, marriage represents a "we-first" relationship that is not popular. In view of this,

how can the church seek to be “pro-marriage” while at the same time acknowledging the brokenness that exists in the world and in our midst?

Let me offer some suggestions.

First, it seems to me that what we don’t need are more in a long list of “God hates divorce” sermons. It’s not that God doesn’t hate divorce. But our “God hates divorce” sermons end up sounding too much like “God hates divorcees.” And God’s hatred of divorce is no different from God’s contempt of all sin. God hates divorce not so much because it violates a rule, but because of the *relational* damage it does to those who are caught in it. God hates our sin because the damage it does to us breaks God’s heart.

Jesus, it seems to me, affirmed God’s plan for the marriage relationship, without relegating to second class status those for whom that relationship had not gone according to plan. He understood the reality of broken relationships in a fallen world. Jesus did not hold peoples’ past over their heads when he forgave them. Neither should we.

Essentially, the Pharisees’ question to Jesus in this text resembles a group of reporters questioning a political candidate at a press conference. The questioners are looking for sound-bites, and anything where the candidate might contradict him or herself.

So the Pharisees’ question is: “Are you anti-divorce?”

And Jesus' response is: "I am pro-marriage."

There is a difference, and it is not merely one of semantics.

My prayer would be that Epworth Chapel on the Green would be a place where all that we do and all that we say would reflect the position that we are "pro-marriage."

But I also pray that we would be a congregation that is loving and compassionate toward those for whom this relationship has not gone according to plan. I pray that we would be a fellowship where healing and forgiving grace could be offered and received. A place where God doesn't hold peoples' past sins against them -- and neither will we.

As we come to the table this morning, we do so with the awareness that all of us are broken, and we know the pain of brokenness in our relationships. As you take these tangible symbols of bread and wine, let them be to you agents of healing and hope. And let them empower you to be agents of healing and hope in the world.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.