

October 4, 2015 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost Mark 10:2-16

For the first three Sundays in October our gospel readings will be coming from Mark 10. This is a hard-hitting chapter where Jesus takes on lots of tough issues. Our readings will cover the areas of divorce, money, and people who strive to be great. There's something there to impact every one of us. Jesus speaks bluntly and openly, not sugar coating anything. We often think of such stern teaching from Jesus as being directed toward the religious and political leaders of that day, many of whom we imagine to be corrupt. By contrast we imagine ourselves to be basically good, so we think harsh teachings don't apply. However, there is no ducking out of these. At least one of them is going to leave us caught and guilty.

Today we have Jesus' teaching on divorce. As is always the case, understanding the context is essential to understanding what Jesus means. We're ten chapters into Mark and things between Jesus and the religious leaders have gotten heated many times already. They ask him what may appear to be an innocent question seeking advice, but it is actually a trap. "It is lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

You'll remember in Jewish and Roman law of the day divorce was legal, a very simple thing really. A man could simply decide he didn't want to be with his wife anymore and all he had to do was make his decision public and that was that. There was no legal record of marriages so breaking one was easy. Women generally didn't own anything. They were considered property of their husband. Children were also of no account. So you didn't need a lawyer or a family court system to arrange a divorce and terms and custody. The man just did whatever he wanted whenever he wanted and that was that. I've heard that grounds for divorce could be as simple as not liking your wife's cooking.

So here's the trap that's been set for Jesus. If he says no to divorce then the Pharisees who are questioning him will say he isn't abiding by the religious law as laid out by Moses. That would get Jesus into trouble. If Jesus says yes to divorce and goes along with the law of Moses he's just batted a political hornets nest. Think a minute, which relative of Jesus literally lost his head because he commented about the divorces and marriages in the Herod family? John the Baptist; a couple chapters earlier. And Mark gives us a geographic note at the beginning of our gospel reading: Jesus went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan - territory under the thumb of Herod.

Does Jesus really want to endorse the Herod family? That's not going to play well with the Jews. And can anyone really be seen to be approving of a way of life that makes the relationships of Hollywood stars seem tame? Also, while divorce was relatively easy, not all Jews approved of divorce. One major group we seldom consider is the Essenes. They strongly rejected divorce.

Jesus has no good answer. So in typical Jesus fashion he reveals the hidden agenda of his opponents. He says to the Pharisees, "What did Moses command you?" And they reply, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her."

Okay, technically they are right. But they've missed the root issue which Jesus brings up, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefor what God has joined together, let no one separate."

What has Jesus ultimately done with this answer? He's removed it from the realm of legalism and rules and exceptions and placed it in a far more human context.

Whenever we see Jesus sparring with the religious leaders we discover this. They speak from technicalities and rules. Jesus speaks to the human condition. We have to remember that is the root of what Jesus is getting to. Too often people replace the legalism from the Pharisees with a legalism from Jesus and we've gone nowhere.

Look carefully at Jesus' words. Does he condemn divorce? No. He calls it a breakdown of the intention of God's creative action. "Sin," to use a different word. Perhaps that's not any more pleasant, but if you want condemning language from Jesus let me remind you of last week's gospel reading where he is threatening hell and punishment for ongoing destructive actions.

Sin might be a word that we don't like to hear, although we confess our sins every Sunday in worship. Indeed sin isn't good, but it isn't the end. Jesus died to save you. And you better realize that you need forgiveness, even if today's gospel doesn't convict you. In the same paragraph that Martin Luther wrote, "Sin and sin boldly, but rejoice and believe in Christ

more boldly still." He also wrote, "Pray boldly for you are a mighty sinner." He wrote this to one of his closest friends, Philip Melanchthon.

This gospel reading illustrates an important truth that Lutheran thinking relies on. Call a sin a sin. Don't duck from it, and rely on the promised love of Christ to save you from it.

Let's apply that to the case of divorce. Lutheran thinking considers divorce to be a sin - pure and simple, no exceptions. It is a breakdown of God's creative intentions. With divorce as a sin you now have the strength to challenge those who take marriage and divorce too lightly. Playing off the ancient Jewish grounds for divorce, those who say, "I want to divorce my wife because she burns the meatloaf," need to be convicted of their silliness. A woman who says, "I've decided I like someone else better than the person I'm married to so I want a divorce," should be challenged for that.

And at exactly the same time you've given terms for understanding the feelings of those who for one reason or another marriage simply isn't working. There's hurt, broken hearts, guilt, shame, child custody and financial issues; all of them huge.

Take the woman whose husband has brutally beaten her and he's been convicted of felony level assault and battery and is service jail time for it. That's obviously grounds for divorce. But does she feel any better for it? Does it help her at all to say, "You're completely innocent. He's a jerk and totally at fault"? No. She hurts. Her hurt is valid. Calling divorce sin is not convicting her of wrongdoing it is validating the feelings of brokenness she is experiencing. It is saying God is hurting, and here's why - the good order God intended has been broken.

Just as Jesus taught, we never take legalistic views on things. Legalism just leads to complicated laws and endless exceptions and justifications. People just get hurt. Instead we look to what God intends and realize the brokenness of the situation. Then we are prepared to respond. We can hold guilty parties accountable. We can nurture the victims. And when things are just all messed up, we realize just how vast sin's web is, and how intricately we can become caught in it.

But as Luther discovered, we still live and act boldly in our Lord Jesus Christ. When sin's got you trapped, "believe and rejoice in Christ more boldly still." Amen