

## **Proper 22B**

**Job 1:1; 2:1-10**

**Psalms 26**

**Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12**

**Mark 10:2-16**

“Lord, take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire” Amen.

Given our Gospel reading this morning, I think I have at least some idea of how entrapped Jesus must have felt by the Pharisees’ question to him about divorce because (it’s a touchy subject to say the least! and) it’s an issue that probably every one of us here is emotionally invested in. Given the times in which we live, we all have most likely been touched in one way or another by divorce - whether it’s because we’ve been divorced ourselves, or have someone in our lives – that we love – who has gone through a divorce, or if, you’re like me, and are the child of a divorce. And so, none of us can hear a passage like the one we’ve just heard from Mark’s Gospel and come to it without already deeply formed opinions – opinions grounded in our own experiences – none of which we can easily set aside or forget. So, objectivity is difficult.

And yet a passage like this one needs to be approached with a great deal of care and consideration (perhaps more than most) because it’s a piece of Scripture that has caused a great a great deal of pain and consternation for many faithful men and women and has also trapped people in unhealthy, unloving, and even abusive marriages. When taken out of context or when used recklessly, a passage like this one can seem pretty harsh and can communicate a very unfriendly and un-Christian message (it can leave us wondering what, in this passage can be thought of as “good news”)...This is also a moment when (as a sidebar) I’d like to explain to those of you who might not know it that, unlike some

other Christian denominations, we follow a “lectionary” in the Episcopal Church – which means that the clergy don’t get to pick and choose what parts of the Bible that we would like to preach on but also means that we have to take the whole of the Bible seriously – which is a good thing. But, I still have to say – for the record – that this is a passage that, when taken by itself, makes me cringe (it is hard enough for me to read let alone to preach on) and is certainly not one that I would have chosen to talk to you about today...

Picking and choosing our Bible verses, however, (lifting them out of context and taking them simply in and of themselves) is very common (we all do it from time to time – clergy included!) but it’s also very problematic because just about anything (almost any behavior) can be justified if we simply lift a verse or a passage out of the Bible and use it by itself. And without doing the work of trying to understand at least some of the social context of whatever piece of Scripture that we are looking at, it can also be quite easy for us – particularly when looking at a passage like our Gospel today – to want to impose upon the text our own modern day assumptions of everyday life – in this case of things as fundamentally important as marriage and divorce – to assume that our modern-day conception of the institution of marriage was held by the men and women of Jesus’ day which, as many might imagine, was not case.

Marriage, for early first-century Jews living in Roman occupied Palestine, had little to do with two people falling in love with one another and starting a family. It was, in fact, far more of a financial arrangement between two families both dominated by men. The woman was a piece of property to be handed over by her father to her husband’s family and, thus, was a passive participant in all of this who usually had absolutely no say in the matter. A woman wouldn’t even be considered a member of her husband’s family after marriage and, so, in the case of a divorce, women were

actually in very vulnerable and precarious positions – left only with the hope that their own families would take them back.

Though opinions widely varied from region to region, this patriarchal understanding of marriage is absolutely essential to understanding the assumptions behind our Gospel today. The male Pharisees question Jesus about an institution that, at the time, really had everything to do with men (and almost nothing to do with women) and Jesus asks them to recite Hebrew law on divorce which really had very little to say about the matter because religion, at the time, had little to do with the institution itself. And yet, what laws that did exist, permitted divorce for a variety of reasons but usually pertained only to the men since, at the time, women were (again) not even thought of as persons but more as property.

As hard as it is for us to keep this in mind, this is what *needs* to be remembered when we look at what Jesus has to say today.

“Jesus says to ... [the Pharisees concerning the allowances for divorce in the law of Moses], “[It is] Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. <sup>6</sup>But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ <sup>7</sup>‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, <sup>8</sup>and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. <sup>9</sup>Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

<sup>10</sup>Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. <sup>11</sup>He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; <sup>12</sup>and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

Putting aside for the moment, the shocking piece here that implies allowances for women to divorce their husbands (which would

have been shocking to Jesus' audience), his real move is to transition from the legalism of the Mosaic law to the fundamental importance of relationships – Jesus goes back to the story of creation to make the point to his all male audience, which bartered and traded women as they would any other piece of property (and frequently discarded them for someone that they deemed better), that God calls us all to a higher ideal – God calls us always into relationship with one another – into communion and that, whether it be a marriage or any other coming together of two people or a community of persons, that relationality needs to be considered sacred – and the most vulnerable people, in particular, need to be cared for and respected.

When we look at the witness of all of the Gospels – we can see that this is always what Jesus does when presented with the legalistic interrogation of the Pharisees or anyone else trying to entrap him in an argument. He always moves us from that legalism and calls us to strive live into a very different way of life.

It is only our continued tendency to be legalistic – I think – that has caused some in the church to grab hold of only a few verses of what Jesus has to say in this passage as proof that divorce should never be allowed under any circumstances. It is only our “heard-heartedness” that, like the Pharisees, looks for some sort of line in the sand that we are supposed to obey and not cross over.

The truth is that I think there are few of us who take our marriages lightly or haphazardly. As the noted preacher William Willimon once rightly commented about our Gospel today,

“We [all] have our limits. We make promises, and with all good intentions we plan to stay together forever. But people get sick, people disappoint, people become trapped, addicted, distant, and estranged. Nobody I know wants divorce. But we [all] have our limits. Sometimes we find it impossible to keep our promises. Sometimes promises are broken for all sorts of "good" reasons.

But in today's gospel [Willimon goes on], Jesus makes clear that *God is not like that*. God is the one who, from the very beginning, makes union, fosters communion and togetherness. God is the one who brings individuals together into community. That's how we got the church. God took us as different individuals, many of us quite unlike one another, and brought us together into communion in the church.”

And so, today's Gospel reading is, it seems, not so much about our hard-heartedness but about God's abundant generosity – not so much about our inability to measure up but about God's consistent call to us to take all our relationships seriously – to reconcile when possible – but, no matter what, to cling to and ground ourselves in God's capacity for love and faithfulness that is limitless and knows no bounds. The invitation is always for us to our best to abide in and live our lives in that love.

But what does this mean in practice?

This calls to mind the church's role in supporting marriage – in encouraging couples in their life together and, when necessary, to help them get the help they need to work through the difficult times in their relationship. As I was reminded this past week (when reflecting upon this Gospel), churches could do a lot better job of all of this! We all need to work to talk about the value of these committed relationships and to push back against our prevailing culture which, in the face of rising divorce rates, has begun to openly question the institution of marriage.

I think many in my own generation, in particular, are beginning to question the value of making a fundamental commitment to another human being over the course of their lives – wondering why this is so important. And, if we in the church stay silent, then many will take that silence to imply our assent.

But I also believe that we are called to reach out to divorced persons and to help them, in whatever way we can to heal from the pain of a broken marriage – which can take a long while even if the divorce was the right thing to do and their healing can take many forms.

In a former parish of mine, I once met a woman who told me the painful story of how her husband abandoned her with two young children and she spoke very movingly to me about how her parish community rallied around her and helped her to not only get back on her feet but to help raise her children. When money got tight, members of her parish pitched in and made sure that there was food on the table and that the kids had all they needed at home. Members of that parish worked together to help get the kids off to school early in the morning or to pick them up at the end of a long day so that their mom could go and get the degree she needed to stabilize her family. And today, she is now a college professor and her kids are grown and college graduates themselves all, according to her, because of the love and support of her parish community – because of the love and support of her brothers and sisters in Christ...**that's** what it means to abide in and live out our lives in the love of God.

But, in that situation, coming to the aid of this woman – who had been abandoned by her husband – would probably have been an easy choice for most of us – something that any of us might have done given the circumstances. But what about her husband? What about that man or woman who, for whatever reason, runs off and gives up on a marriage. In the case of this woman's husband, he ran off and never came back – he never came back and gave that parish community a chance to respond to him – probably because he rightly feared begin judged or ostracized by men and women who had previously been his friends.

As Christians, I believe that, whenever possible, it is also our role to reach out to individuals in *that* situation as well – to do what we can to embrace and to help bring about healing in *that* person’s life as well – as hard as it might be for some of us. **That’s also** what it means for us to abide in and live out our lives in the love of God – to reach out to others (as best we are able) with the same abundant love and generosity of spirit and constant desire for healing that we receive from God.

May we always abide in such love and do our utmost, with God’s grace to reach out to all those around us.

AMEN.