

7 October 2018

Whitsuntide 19

St Mark 10: 2 - 16

We begin a century or so before the time of Jesus when there were two very influential rabbis, an uncle and nephew. Each had their own school and following of disciples. Gamiliel was the uncle, a generation older, and to very briefly sum him up, he was a legalist and ultra-conservative. His dictum was straight forward: "This is what the Commandments say. This is what the law says. This is what you must do or must avoid. There can be no deviation. No excuses, no changes."

You can understand why the Pharisees loved him, and when we read St Paul writing that he was a devout Pharisee, a super Pharisee of the Pharisees on spiritual steroids, one who exceeded everyone else in his scrupulous obedience to the Law, he was making it clear that he was a disciple of Gamiliel.

Hillel was completely different in his approach. The law is a living document. Approach it carefully and prayerfully, but understand that it is ancient, and never fear to question whether everything in it still applies today. Consider the human condition, the frailties of mankind.

Today, at many colleges and universities where there is a Jewish congregation, many of their synagogues are known as the Hillel Centre, and they are attended by members of the Reformed tradition. Orthodox Jewish students would not attend services or study there. In turn, that makes it a bit more clear that there is still a division between the two.

With these two men and their opposing approaches to the laws and commandments in mind, we now turn to our Gospel passage this morning. We read that some Pharisees came up to Jesus with a question. It was a test question, to find out whether Jesus followed the strict obedience traditions of Gamiliel or the liberal traditions of Hillel when it came to the subject of divorce. This wasn't a rhetorical question, but a means of sizing up Jesus - are you going to obey the laws of Moses or are you deviating from it.

Here is the challenge you and I face. St Mark records our Lord's answer when Jesus asks, "What do you say?" It's more than a challenge for us - it is a real problem, because all we have are the written words and not the tone of voice or inflection. Did Jesus ask in a flat voice, "What do you say?" Or, did He put the emphasis on the word "You?" "What do YOU say?" How do you interpret the Law? Who are you following - Gamiliel or Hillel?

The subject was divorce. Gamiliel made it clear - the only possible justification for divorce was adultery. Period. And even then, if the couple reconciled and forgave each other, then that justification was off the table. But Hillel took a far more subjective approach and said divorce was permissible for any legitimate reason such as irreconcilable differences.

Divorce is a contemporary challenge, and one which has probably touched every family represented here today.

But the subject or the question of divorce is not the main thing. It goes deeper than that. Ultimately, when we explore this passage much more deeply, it is a matter of respect. We see that theme arising when Jesus used the phrase, 'because of the hardness of your heart.' Hardened hearts rarely include room for respecting the ideas or practices of others. We see it again in the concluding verses where for yet another time he takes a young child and places the youngster at the center of the conversation. A child - the weakest, least powerful, most vulnerable person in society, and the message is clear: This child is worthy of respect. Respect for God and all that He has given us; respect for others; respect for the possessions entrusted to us; and perhaps most importantly - self-respect.

I believe we have just one problem in this country: It is a growing mentality of disrespect or lack of respect for God, others, and ourselves. That is the one great problem, at least to my way of thinking. I am convinced that if we consistently put the emphasis on respect, then nearly all of the animosity and rancor will begin to dissipate, and we can be so much more than we are today.

In a matter of seconds you and I can think of hideous, glaring examples of disrespect all around us, and my guess is that almost instantly our minds zoom straight to national politics, especially to the executive and legislative branches of government. But there is nothing new about that. I would say the same thing if you and I lived in 1800 and I wrote my sermon with a quill pen, or 1860 and I was using an ink pen with a steel nib, or 1932 and I used a typewriter, it would be much the same. The only real difference are the names and technology to report words and actions.

Politics is the great chameleon in all cultures and society. It is a reflection of the attitudes and words and actions of people. If we believe that officials are behaving badly, it is only because they believe it is what we expect and even want of them.

Disrespect begins when we cultivate the idea that we are owed, deserve, or are entitled to almost anything. Today's over-used word on this topic is "Deserve." For years I have heard a repeated radio advertisement from a drapery company in Chicago that entices people to buy their products and services with the instruction, give you windows the treatment they deserve. Really? Did your windows tell you they deserve more, or are you lured in because you want to feel better about yourself by buying new drapes and shades. Or, remember a few decades ago when McDonald's told us we should visit their drive-thru for their products because we deserve a break today.

As children, like that child in the passage, most of us were constantly taught lessons about respect, and with it responsibility and humility. My father had some wild idea that if he bought an accordion and paid for my lessons I could be the next Lawrence Welk or Myron Floren. He was a great man, but he had some daffy ideas. And like most children, I didn't like practicing scales and chords. I balked at the 20 minutes I had to practice each day. Then one afternoon when I was sulking about this task Mother said very quietly, your father spent a lot of money for that accordion and works hard to pay for your lessons. You might want to think about that. That didn't make practicing fun, but I got the message.

We carry that into adult life. Most of us have an automobile and we take it to the shop for servicing, such as oil and filter changes. Why? Because we know we earned and saved to buy that vehicle, and

we have sufficient self-respect to take care of it. Most of us own or have owned a lawnmower. We learned to respect that tool - check the oil before filling the gas tank, then start it. Otherwise, you are destroying an expensive engine. That is respect for an object, but also for ourselves.

Objects, things, pale in comparison to the real challenge -respect for other people. I said earlier that it is very easy to look at politics on all level to see endless examples of lack of respect. As I said a few moments ago, politics is the chameleon of human life. They are a reflection of you and me. It is the retelling of Oscar Wilde's Portrait of Dorian Grey. That was a horror story, a Vincent Price horror movie, but it is an important one. If we rely on privilege and entitlement, and are lacking in respect for others, our soul will look like the hideous portrait hidden under the canvas up in the attic.

That is why, when we join together to re-affirm our Baptismal Vows we all promise - not just the godparents or parents, but all of us - to uphold the dignity of every human being. That is the heart of true respect - upholding the dignity of others. We promise to wage a ceaseless spiritual battle against Satan and the works of darkness. Pride, ego, and a sense of entitlement are his tools in trade.

It's at the heart of thoughtfulness, awareness of others, and those seemingly small acts of kindness. Things like holding open a door and allowing them to go first. Yes, they are perfectly capable of opening their own door. It's a tangible sign of being thoughtful.

Again, Jesus asked the Pharisees what do you think? What is your understanding and level of respect for others. You and I are challenged by that same question. If we are truly sincere about wanting to love and serve Him, we'd better figure out the answer, and then do it.

He took a child and set him or her in the middle of them. That made a statement: Here is your future. If we want to make a better world for the children, we need to believe that the future will be better. If you want that better future, then do what you know in the depths of your soul is right. For unless you believe that the future can be better, we are unlikely to step up and take responsibility for making it so. It starts here. It starts with us.