

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

Psalm 26

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

Mark 10:2-16

If last week's scripture passages gave preachers insomnia and heartburn, then the ones we heard this week are likely to precipitate a nervous breakdown. These are the sorts of passages that generate sleepless nights and haunted days. They are the sorts of passages that no one wants to talk about. The lectioners leave out over half the Bible during a three year cycle, but they never miss these parts. These words are the ones they want us to wrestle with; to quarrel over; and to chew on. The Gospel lesson this morning is a lesson that no preacher in his or her right mind wants to tackle. There's a dagger in every sentence and a contradiction at every period. There are no 'right' answers here...and the Pharisees who put this question to Jesus knew that full well. Here's another 'trap' to see if they can get Jesus to say something that will render him a heretic or subject him to the wrath of Rome. And as Jesus usually does in these situations, he wiggles himself out of the situation while dropping crumbs of grace and mercy and understanding to all who can hear.

The impossible question posed to Jesus by the Pharisees is this: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" They didn't ask him if it was all right. They asked him if it was lawful. Immediately, Jesus turns back to Mosaic law and reminds them that Moses, because of their hardness of heart had provided them with a procedure for divorce. A man could serve his wife with a Certificate of Divorce and the marriage was over. No justification needed. So that the man wouldn't just kick her out of the house, Moses provided her with a process that included a Certificate of Divorce that she would probably need as she went out into the world on her own. Especially if she had children, the Certificate of Divorce provided proof that she had been married and that her children were not the result of a wayward lifestyle. It's easy in ancient Palestine for a woman's good reputation to go down the drain in the blink of an eye. And a bad reputation is almost as much of a stumbling block to caring for one's self as having no money and no avenue for making any.

Sometimes it's easy for us to forget what daily life was like in first century Palestine. It's easy for us to listen to Jesus' words now and forget that circumstances were different for the men and women he loved and nurtured than they are for us. But Jesus' love and care and tenderness are no different with them than they are for us. In first century Palestine both males and females married in their early teens. If they could, they had as many children as possible and as quickly

as possible. Children were extra hands in the fields to help with crops and livestock or with their father selling manufactured goods. They were old and settled themselves by the time they reached their twenties and by age thirty, they were considered old and over the hill. When Jesus was crucified at 33yo he was actually considered an old man and well past his prime.

When we think about this question of divorce posed by the Pharisees, it's not exactly the same thing that we experience in the 21st century when men and women routinely live long enough to have Golden Wedding Anniversaries. And in the world in which Jesus has been asked this question about divorce, we are not looking at women of independent means, prolific educations, career goals, marketability and ambition. Women in first century Palestine were only one step up from the livestock in terms of respect and credibility. Jesus does not answer "No" to this question of divorce, but as he always does, he advocates for the voiceless...the one who is socially outcast...the one without resources...and the one without agency. He advocates for children and he advocates for women...particularly the one who has been divorced. And he doesn't lay blame anywhere.

In going back to the creation story, Jesus reminds all of them and us...the purpose of the creation of both male and female. God created man first and then seeing that he needed a companion and a helpmate, he removed a rib from Adam's side and with bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, God made a companion for Adam...someone with whom he could share his life...someone he could create common memories with...someone he could care for and love. And in turn, she would look after his needs...make clothes for him...prepare food for him...and comfort him when he felt discouraged and love him in return. Out of man she was taken, therefore a man shall leave his mother and his father and cling to his wife as they become one flesh. According to Holy scripture, this was the way marriage was intended to be. But man being who he is...and woman being who she is...disobedience to God rears its ugly head and things don't always work out the way God intended...or even the way the man and the woman had originally intended.

So we know that Jesus is tender-hearted and he looks out for the sick and the lame and those who have been damaged in any way...including those who are possessed by demons. That's what Jesus models for all of us. So Jesus never says, "No, it's not lawful to get a divorce." Jesus knows how things are between men and women and they don't always live the way they are supposed to or act the way they are supposed to or keep their promises the way they are supposed to. Human beings are not perfect. They are sinful. They follow their own desires and sometimes neglect to keep their word or their promises. By declining to say that it is unlawful for a man to divorce his wife, Jesus is acknowledging the reality of the sinful nature of human beings.

But all the while, Jesus is also reminding us to take care of the disadvantaged...the ones who cannot take care of themselves...the ones who are dependent on the kindness of strangers. Jesus charges each one of us to look out for the one who can't look out for himself. In Jesus' world, most of the time, this would be children and perhaps women, or it might be someone who is in some way impaired. Jesus tells us always to look out for the least of these even as he declines to answer the question: Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? He doesn't say that it is. And he doesn't say that it isn't. By going back to the creation story, Jesus reminds all of us of the way God had intended for it to be between man and woman. But our own inability to live up to God's fondest wishes for us means that Jesus knows that we sometimes mess things up. We are not always kind and patient. We don't always forgive as quickly or as thoroughly as we should. We don't necessarily take care of one another as God has intended. Because we are all flawed and because we sometimes both unintentionally and intentionally harm one another, Jesus knows that sometimes the best thing for two people to do when they find themselves in an irreparably damaged relationship is to part company...even though Jesus never says that directly. We know that he wants people to live with a sense of safety and with a sense of being valued and cared for and with a sense of dignity. He doesn't want anyone to live in fear or in emotional pain.

We also know that Jesus does not want us to mistreat one another even as he knows that sometimes we are so flawed and broken ourselves that we can't help ourselves. Remember, Jesus is always for the underdog. Jesus is always for the one with few if any resources. Jesus is always for the one whose heart is broken or whose body does not work as God had intended it to.

Jesus never answers the Pharisees' question directly. He never says, "Yes. You can divorce your wife." or "No, it is not lawful to divorce your wife." If you cannot be kind and forgiving to your wife or if you lust after another and want to be free of your wife, then Jesus knows how truly broken you are. And your wife, knowing that she is unloved and despised and not worthy of her husband's care and concern is surely broken as well. It is to the broken that Jesus came. It is for the broken that Jesus came into the world. And we are the broken. It is for the broken that Jesus came to bless us...to heal us...to make us well...to bind up our wounds. It was for us...the broken...that Jesus blessed us by laying down his own life.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.