

St Pius & St Anthony 27th Sunday Ordinary Time Year B2

This is a test! Mark says it, in 10:2 “They were testing him.” What is the test? It seems a simple enough legal question: is it lawful for husband to divorce his wife? But the testiness, comes from the sly manipulation intended by the Pharisees. The subject could have been anything- they’re not interested in any particular answer. They just want to discredit Jesus. And they don’t care who they hurt trying to get there. They want to make themselves look good (Jesus look bad) and hold on to their authority position (*they are just into keeping power, refer to Matt 23:13 & Luke 11:52*). The Pharisees are contriving an old trick/test, a classic maneuver that kids play on parents. Consider that as a kid, I want to spend a night at Todd’s house. I ask mom, and she is not warm to the idea, so I turn and go ask dad, ‘Mom thought it was okay, can I go spend the night at Todd’s house?’

Normally, though, that move, only works one time. In the Pharisees’ childish case, they are trying to play from the middle, pitting Jesus against Moses.

But following Jesus, we can never overlook, that at the center of this dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees, is a **broken human couple** experiencing the emotional pain and trauma of a failing/failed marriage. If I had to think of an image or story to best explain Jesus’ approach to handling the delicate topic of divorce, it would be this: When I was a kid, for a while, I was a Cub Scout. It is deeply ingrained in a scout’s mindset, the value of respecting nature-working with it but always respecting it. On campouts and days in woods, the usual directives were drilled into us, (like the national parks’ campaign ‘Leave No Trace’). Heading to camp, Den Mothers would say, “Carry out everything you carry in, but **only** what you carry in.” Today, they’d say, ‘Take only photographs, and leave only footprints’. They taught us to respect what we were traipsing into. So, on one campout, there was a commotion over at edge of woods, and kids were all huddled around something, and as I walked over, the Scout Master was closing in on it too. He saw the boy holding a little bird nest with broken eggs in it, and began scolding him for interfering with/disrupting nature’s cycle, and the little boy just kept pleading, “It was all broken when I found it – they were broken already.” I get it. Some things we come upon and the brokenness is what we find, the hurt and harm have already occurred. So, we are called to help bring things back together, the best we can (if we can). And of course, we try and prevent further breakage and harm. So, that brings us to where Jesus comes in, on this discussion about divorce with the Pharisees: a very real and very personal question. I think it is safe to say today, that everyone is affected by divorce. If not yourself, then likely a parent, a child, a brother or sister have gone or is going

through such a painful experience. And as Jesus will show us, when it comes to human relationships breaking down, (as REM sang) “Everybody Hurts”. I love though, how Jesus takes the discussion to a humanely compassionate place by a little performance art (act) that we might have seen as disconnected at the end of today’s gospel: The gesture of lifting up the child. After the disciples discourage some children from approaching Jesus, Jesus intervenes, and in Mark 10:14, He lifts up a child saying, *“Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom belongs to them.”* That’s not a next day event, after He moved on to something else. No, He still has the issue of divorce on His heart. By that act, Jesus is telling the Pharisees and the crowd, what we hear all the time ourselves in conversations about breakups – who hurts the most? - It is the children. So, keep them in the center. *(as if general rule given, how does this--whatever I do or say--affect children, how will child understand this, will this help or hurt the children)*

So Jesus is setting the tone of our discussion about divorce, its allowance or not. Jesus is our healer-he knows our hearts and what speaks to our hurts. I think the saying applies here to Jesus best of all, (unlike the Pharisees) that “People won’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” In this gospel case, Jesus cares, and the Pharisees do not. The Pharisees are capitalizing on people’s pain to look good themselves and knock down Jesus in the public eye. Jesus knows this: He knows that the Pharisees don’t care about the people involved in their case question, they are only using people to promote their own position. But, Jesus can speak to our hearts’ hurt and heal them, yet also confront the Pharisees’ self-serving manipulation of this argument. I like how Jesus first says, (like my dad confronting my trick, “what did your mom say?”) Jesus asks them, “What did Moses say?” Insinuating that they haven’t done their homework Do they know their own law? Of course, like smart-alecks answering their own set-up question they say back, “Yes in fact Moses allowed such a practice (Jesus could have replied, “so what is your question?”) But Jesus works with this answer, and actually exposes the Pharisees’ exploitative intention here, that they are engaging in what is popularly now called, ‘weaponizing’ Mosaic Law against women. We have to keep in mind that Moses’ permission here, wasn’t necessarily exceptional or only about hardship cases. No, Deut 24:14 seemed to leave it to husband’s tastes to assign a cause/reason for them to discard a wife-to trade off a wife for newer model) Jesus’ response, shows Him confront the inequality and sex discrimination in society, because he highlights the unjust one-sided, prerogative given only males to initiate the divorce *(what’s a woman to do about her own case of ‘abuse’ or ‘abandonment’?-there was no recourse in that world)* Jesus knows the deck

is stacked against wives. But Jesus is also confronting the Pharisees. They are using hurt people (real human lives) to attack Jesus. And He responds by 'humanizing the whole debate.' As if He says, "We are talking about real people here, not statistics". Jesus doesn't want any more further hurt and division, (we all know how easily divorce can open up further, the divisive game of everyone pushing/pulling- pointing fingers and blame at one party or other in a divorce, splitting whole families beyond only the couple pulling apart. Jesus cautions, avoidance of such response, by saying let's go back to the beginning. What should marriage be and how it was set up by God's design. Jesus takes us back to Genesis. Pharisees looked to Moses' authority, but Jesus goes 'more ancient' on them. Over the head of Moses, Jesus appeals to God the Creator. There in Genesis, God planned the fruitfulness of human family and the lifelong partnership of trust between husband and wife as the original plan. But marriage is more than just an agreement between two people for their own fun and enjoyment. God intends marriage as a mission to bring new life-children into the world amid the loving cooperation of two people in relationship. Talk about learning by example. The child is taught cooperation, mutuality, sharing/caring lifestyle when they see it in parents. So, Jesus wishes to keep the child in the center of the marriage bond, and calls **all of us** to work toward fostering reconciliation, healing and union again for hurting couples. When it comes to marriage, **we all** have a part to play in its preservation. To pray for, to support, love and encourage, and if possible reconcile and keep marriage whole, but above all to cultivate the heart of Jesus in ourselves before stepping in (or stepping on) another person's hurt or brokenness. Like Jesus, we hold to the center, where He put the child (and aren't we all God's children?).