

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

Psalm 26

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

Mark 10:2-16

No. No. No. No. No.

That's very often the first reaction that preachers have when they come across this scripture lesson in the Lectionary. Who is their right mind would want to preach on this particular lesson? When I was in seminary, our homiletics professor would say to us, on a regular basis, "Where's the good news? Find the good news and that's what you want to preach on." Searching for the good news in this passage is like the little boy shoveling furiously through a large pile of manure that he'd received in answer to a wish...quite certain that there was a pony in there somewhere!!!

We know that the writer of the gospel of Mark is quite blunt in the way he says things. He seems to have little patience with the Pharisees, with Jesus' followers, or with the often clueless disciples. The words that come from Jesus in Mark's gospel sound harsh at times and what we've just heard this morning is no exception. As always, in order to find our way to the good news we have to look at the context in which Jesus is speaking.

The Pharisees are still asking Jesus difficult questions in the hopes of trapping him into saying something that will inflame the Romans or offend the crowds of Jews following him. More often than not, Jesus ends up deflating the Pharisees and very deftly stepping out of the way of their trap. Today, they want to entice Jesus into saying something about marriage and divorce that will get him into trouble.

Let's not forget the big picture, though. Jesus has come to disrupt the status quo. He has come to share the nature and the will of God. He is here to champion the underdog...to lift up the vulnerable and the oppressed. And he is here to heal the sick, the wounded and the broken. And he is here to correct our mistaken understandings of the nature of God and God's will for us. Stay focused on Jesus' mission to champion the vulnerable and the oppressed.

The Pharisees set the trap by asking Jesus if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. They already know that it is lawful, so they are trying to lure Jesus into saying something that will condemn him. Keep Jesus' 'big picture' in mind. In the rigidly patriarchal society in which they all lived, a divorced woman on her own had little chance of survival. Without the protection and income of a man, she had no home, no way to buy food, no way to clothe herself and she had

no standing in the community. She was alone and an outcast. So to be a divorced woman was to be vulnerable and oppressed. Jesus confirms that Moses had given the men the legal right of divorce, but he did so because of their hard hearts. As Jesus often does, he shifts the conversation to what God intended when he created marriage. He intended that a man would leave his parents and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. One flesh can only be separated with a meat cleaver. The two shall be so close that when one weeps, the other will taste salt. When God joins a man and a woman together, his intention is to create a sphere in which each of them could live toward the other by practicing mirroring their divine image. God intended for marriage to be a protection for a woman and a child or children and to be a source of comfort and support for a man.

But we are broken people in a broken world. Despite our best efforts to the contrary our dreams of how marriage will be sometimes don't work out. We don't always provide the protection that God intended and we don't always find the comfort and support that is needed. Relationships don't always work out. Indeed some of them go so far astray from the ideal that it must be an affront to God if they continue. When divorce happens it is a heartbreak. All the youthful dreams are shattered. The ones involved have war wounds laced with profound disappointment, a sense of guilt, and feelings of shame and anger that they had not expected. No one goes through a divorce without feeling as if they had somehow failed at something very important to them. It's a hurt and a grief that lasts a long time. It is in these moments that we realize that we are broken people desperately in need of healing. And that's exactly why Jesus came to us as he did.

Later, when Jesus and the disciples were in the house, Jesus made some even more stringent comments. He told them that anyone who divorces his wife and marries another is committing adultery against her. And any woman who divorces her husband and marries another commits adultery against him. These are shocking statements. Partly because they are so harsh, but more importantly because women didn't have enough social standing for a man to commit adultery *against* them! And women were not allowed to divorce their husbands. So hidden in these seemingly ruthless statements about adultery is an elevation of women that didn't reflect the current mores of society in which Jesus was living and preaching. Jesus didn't say these words to hold any of us up to judgement. Jesus doesn't do that with anyone except the Pharisees. And he doesn't condemn them. He confronts them with their hypocrisies. Jesus is not about condemnation. Do you remember the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery and the crowd surrounding her ready to stone her? What were Jesus' words to them? "Let he who is without fault cast the first stone." And knowing that they were all sinful, they set down their stones and walked away.

As if to soften the blow of these tough words, the scripture turns immediately to Jesus' reaction to the little children who were clamoring to see him. The disciples were trying to turn the children away to protect Jesus who didn't want to be protected from them, but wanted to embrace them. He swooped them up in his arms and blessed. And then Jesus told them, "...for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Jesus wants us to receive the kingdom of God with the faith and the trusting heart of a little child.

We will never enter the kingdom of God based on how well we obeyed the laws or how closely we came to being perfect. None of us can be perfect. That's an impossible dream. But we can enter the kingdom of God based on our faith in the grace of God. We are most blessed in our lives when we have messed up so badly that we can't ignore it or get around it or explain it away. When we have hit the bottom and recognize our own brokenness we become aware of our own dependence on God. It is then that we are ready for God's healing embrace. When we come to God with the faith of a child, believing and knowing that we are loved and forgiven, the gates of heaven open wide. To those who would say, "Well, I know God forgives me. I just can't forgive myself." I have just a few words. God's grace does us no good unless we take it in and make it part of us. The gift that Jesus gave us in coming to live among us and suffering death to build a bridge for us is the greatest gift we will ever receive...ever!! And when we refuse to forgive ourselves it's as if we are holding this beautiful gift-wrapped package in our hands, and we say, "thank you" and then we refuse to open it and use whatever is inside. We don't open the package!!! We set it aside believing that it's just too good for us. By refusing to open the package...by setting it aside and not using it...we are actually rejecting the most precious and useful gift we will ever receive. When we don't forgive ourselves, we are rejecting God's all-consuming love for us. Is that *really* what we want to do? OK. So you've made a mistake. Maybe it's a big mistake. Or maybe you have figured out that you make mistakes every day. OK. So now what?

Get up off the ground. Stop wasting your time and energy beating yourself up. Open the beautiful gift wrapped package filled with God's grace and forgiveness and love. Take it in and use it to God's glory! And breathe a deep sigh of relief.

Entering into the kingdom of God is not about how good we are or how many laws we kept or how well and how often we kept them. Entering into the kingdom of God is about God's never-ending love for us and Jesus' sacrifice in coming to join us in order to take us back home. It's an impossible dream, but the only thing in life that is absolutely true.

That's the good news!

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.