

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Pentecost 19B (Proper 22B)
October 3, 2021
Mark 10:2-16

A Case of a Hardened Heart

Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"
(Mark 10:2 ESV)

In the Name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world.

Asking the wrong question will invariably end up with the wrong answer. When we ask Law questions, especially the "What if..." types of questions, we need to realize that we are on dangerous ground. It's dangerous because it often means that we're trying to look for loopholes in the Law rather than simply doing what the Law requires. It might also indicate that we are trying to justify ourselves, that is, we're trying to convince ourselves, and possibly others, and maybe even God, that we really aren't all that bad. We thus delude ourselves into not taking our sins as seriously as we should. Or, by asking those kinds of questions, we may be seeking to judge someone else. In any case, when we ask the wrong question, we'll end up with the wrong answer.

Now it needs to be said up front that the episode in today's Gospel is not really about divorce at all. Rather, it's all about the hardness of man's heart. The real issue is man's stubborn and rebellious refusal to submit to God's Word and His will. The Pharisees' question about divorce is merely an illustration of that truth.

Jesus was making His final journey to Jerusalem. The Pharisees had been harassing Him almost from the beginning. They had set their hearts on getting rid of Him. So when they asked Him the loaded question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?", they weren't seeking information. They weren't interested in a discussion about divorce and they weren't interested in hearing about God's design for marriage. They were simply trying to trap Jesus. They wanted something to use against Him.

Now to understand how devious they were, we need to understand that there was more to the question than is obvious. For the two leading rabbis of the day differed on what constituted legal grounds for divorce. And these differences were based on differing interpretations of Deuteronomy 24:1, which reads, "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house. . . ." Hillel, the more liberal of the two, said a man could divorce his wife for any reason, even for burning his meal. One of his followers, Rabbi Akiba, allowed a wife to be released whenever the husband found a better-looking woman. Sounds rather modern, don't you think? The other school of thought, the one of Shammai, said a man

could divorce his wife only in cases of unfaithfulness. In this case, the husband could write her a certificate of divorce and send her away quietly, much as Joseph wanted to do when he was told that Mary was pregnant. Or he could write her the certificate of divorce and bring charges against her before the elders of the city. And if he was able to produce proof of her infidelity, she could be stoned to death.

So it is that Jesus is given two choices. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Yes or no? But Jesus knew the evil that was in their hearts. So rather than answer their deceitful question directly, Jesus went on the offensive. He directed them to the beginning of creation. Rather than discuss divorce, Jesus talked about the original intent of marriage. When God created man and woman, He intended for them to live together forever. He intended for marriage to be the most important and intimate of relationships. One man plus one woman equals one flesh. Marriage by God's design was to be a life-long union of one man and one woman, "as long as we both shall live." This union was supposed to be a blessing for both because man and woman were a gift to each other.

But because of the fall into sin, everything is corrupted, including the marriage relationship. Because of man's hardness of heart, because of his sinfulness, he has totally corrupted marriage and how we view marriage. Rather than a lifelong commitment, man has turned marriage into "as long as we both shall love." And yet, nothing we say or do can set aside God's original intent that marriage was to be a lifelong union of a man and a woman, a union to be dissolved only by God Himself. Furthermore, anything that brings in a foreign element to the marriage is sinful, whether abuse, adultery, pornography, divorce, or any other sinful thoughts, words, or deeds. Anything that leads to the breakup of a marriage is sinful because it destroys what God has established. Divorce is sinful because it is man's way of playing God.

But what man had destroyed by sin, God restored. For God had created man and woman to live in a perfect relationship with Him and with each other. But man's sin separated what God had joined together. Not just between husband and wife, but also between man and God. But rather than divorce us because of our adultery of having other gods, God did everything necessary to bridge the gulf between us and Him. He sent His only Son to give His life for us. Jesus endured the threats of the Pharisees, and died on the cross for our sins. He took our hard-heartedness, our divorces, our adultery, and our guilt upon Himself in order to set us free from them. By God's grace our sins are forgiven in and through Jesus Christ. What man has rent asunder, Christ has joined together.

So the answer to the Pharisees' question was, "Yes, divorce is legal. But that doesn't make it right. It is merely a concession to your hearts hardened in sin." And we don't need concessions, we need forgiveness. We don't need an easier law that lets us do what we want. We need law which gives us no wiggle room at all - no loopholes, no way out. We need law that nails us to the wall with the horrible reality of our utter depravity and sinfulness. We need law which does not let us off the hook of our own sinful desires. Only such law will lead us to see the reality of the depth of our sin and lead us to see our need for a Savior.

And such a Savior we have. A Savior who will not let us remain in our sin. A Savior who won't let us think that what the world accepts and tolerates is something that He didn't die for. He died for all sins, to take what's wrong and suffer what it rightfully deserves. Thus He cleanses us to be His Bride.

And as we have been brought into a restored relationship with God in our Baptism, we are to do everything we can to bring others into it too. That's why Jesus was so upset with the disciples' hardness of heart. While the Pharisee's hard-heartedness kept them from worshipping Christ, the disciples' hard hearts moved them to keep others from worshipping Him. Some parents had brought their children so that Jesus could touch them. But the disciples didn't want Jesus to be bothered. So Jesus had to teach the disciples about the importance of a child-like faith. Such a faith trusts in our Father in heaven, even as children trust their parents for all things. Certainly He is trustworthy. He keeps His promises. Especially that He forgives us for Jesus' sake.

Likewise, when Jesus said, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it," He states the truth that even as a child is a gift from God, and must be received as such, so also the kingdom of God is a gift from God and must be received as such. It cannot be earned or deserved, but received as a gift. Thus Jesus demonstrates this truth when He receives the children brought to Him.

Yet, as Jesus accepted and received the children, He did so much more than the parents expected. He not only touched the children; He took them in his arms and blessed them. And He does the same for us. As He takes us in His arms and blesses us, He does so abundantly. He forgives all our sins, the great and the small, sins of omission and sins of commission, those we know and those we don't know.

By God's grace, repent of your hard-heartedness and honor marriage as the life-long relationship God made it to be, and love and honor your spouse. And if your marriage ended in divorce because of unfaithfulness or any other reason, repent of anything you might have done to contribute to it and live in the overflowing forgiveness that is yours in Christ. Each of you, repent of your hard-heartedness that drives a wedge between you and others, and that drives, or pushes, others away from Christ. Turn to Christ for forgiveness and restoration. Receive Him and the Kingdom of God as the gift they are. Rejoice in your Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus, who gave His life for you and for all so that you may live with Him in heavenly bliss forever. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

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