



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 20 – Proper 22 (B)

Behind the Question

[RCL]: Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 8; Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

We live in a society where just over 50% of all marriages end in divorce, therefore our Gospel reading today on the surface can read as a real doozy. It begins with the Pharisees coming to test Jesus about marriage. Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? This question is both political and theological – political, because it takes place in the region of Judea ruled by Herod Antipas, who had already beheaded John the Baptist for his criticism of Herod remarrying Herodias, his brother’s wife. So, the Pharisees are thinking that, if Jesus answers the wrong way politically, maybe Herod will get rid of Jesus in the same way he got rid of John the Baptist.

The question is also theological, so Jesus answers the theological question with a theological question. What did Moses command you? Now, tradition taught that Moses wrote the entire Torah – the first five books of the Bible – and there are several passages on marriage in the Torah. But the Pharisees, of all those passages on marriage, choose the loophole passage, Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which they paraphrase: “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.”

At the time, there were two interpretations of Deuteronomy 24 among the Pharisees. The school of Shammai interpreted Deuteronomy 24 to mean that a man may divorce his wife only in the case of adultery. The school of Hillel interpreted the same passage to mean that a man may divorce his wife for nearly any fault that he might find in her. If she allowed her hair to clog the shower drain, that marriage was over. Never mind the fact the husband was always leaving the seat up. When it came to the Pharisees on this particular matter, 99.9% agreed with Hillel. This was the definition of gender inequality; women were easily discarded, and at that time the consequences of divorce for a wife were devastating.

In context, what Moses actually says in Deuteronomy 24 is that, if the husband and wife get a divorce, and she remarries and something happens in the second marriage, she can’t go back to the first husband. Also, the certificate of divorce in the Deuteronomic context functioned as an annulment, so she could go back to her family. In a way, perhaps difficult for us to understand, this law was designed to protect the woman.

Jesus points out that this law was an accommodation, “because of [the] hardness” of their hearts. Their faithless hearts, unwilling to receive the gift of God.

Therefore, Jesus trumps Deuteronomy with Genesis 2: “But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’” In their tradition, this is what Moses said about husbands and wives in the beginning: Before Adam and Eve became self-oriented through sin, divorce actually didn’t exist. This is the first point: Divorce is a fruit of the fall. Divorce is not a part of the natural order of things. Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? Divorce can and may be tragically needful, and divorce may be horribly inevitable. Yet it is never lawful. The answer is “no,” divorce is never *lawful*, no matter what the circumstances.

People like the Pharisees, who want to justify themselves before anyone, especially God, will always look for a loophole. This is why modern Christianity is losing credibility across the Western world – because the religion we have created, left and right, conservative and liberal, is filled with loopholes and the world sees right through it. Listen closely: No one is justified before God by marriage and no one will be discredited by God on the basis of divorce.

What is taking place in this exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees, what is taking place between you and the text, is what therapists call “the question behind the question.” The Pharisees’ challenge is not about divorce but about self-justification before God. Hence, Jesus closes up all the loopholes and their “self-justification projects” when he says, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

In this statement, Jesus closes the loophole of a certificate of divorce, which lets men off the hook, by placing men and women on equal footing like they were in Genesis before the fall, thus driving home the point that no one will be justified before God by the law or a loophole within it. God’s Law when it is understood properly silences all the questions of whether it is *lawful* for me to do *this*, or will I be *justified* before God for doing *that*, because God’s law, St. Paul says, has only the power to kill.

In The Episcopal Church, we remarry people who have been divorced, and what comes up in counseling and reflection is often heartbreak about the previous marriage. A part of the person died in that previous relationship, and everyone who has been through a divorce knows that to be the case. People die in a divorce. However, we worship and know the God who always, by virtue of his Gospel, raises the dead and makes all things new – and the new marriage is typically the fruit of a real resurrection. One must understand how heavy the *Law* of God is in order to understand what God’s amazing *Grace* actually is. You’re justified not by the loophole but by Jesus alone.

This is the second point: Marriage is good, but it can't ever save us. Marriage is not a *means* of grace, but as those who are or have been married know, marriage is always in dire *need* of grace. The foundation of marriage is love, but grace and forgiveness hold the foundation together.

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” Genesis 2:25 ultimately finds its fulfillment in God's redeeming grace. Christ is the true Adam who leaves his father to be forsaken on the cross and leaves his mother to his beloved apostle John, in order to cling to his bride, the church. This is a church that he creates from his wounded side in water and blood, uniting himself to us through his appointed means of word, water, bread, and wine. And you, fellow brides, in Christ's new covenant, with you there are no loopholes or escape hatches, only love, hope, and the certainty of being unified with Jesus in the age that is to come.

There is a flow to the Gospel reading, explaining why it goes from divorce to Jesus taking little children into his arms and blessing them. “Let the little children come to me; and do not stop them for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” This has nothing to do with innocence or purity; rather, the children become a living answer to the question behind the questions, “Is it lawful to do this or that?” and “What do I need to do to justify myself before God?” You see, children are needy. Children don't have a resumé to try and justify themselves. Children are utterly givable to, because children are needy. And before God, so are we. This is why we bring our babies to baptism: that Jesus may touch them and bless them.

This is the third point: Babies, not Pharisees - babies, not even well-behaved disciples – are the picture of the Kingdom of God. Babies are a living illustration of receiving grace from God, entirely a gift, not earned in a loophole. So as brides with no loopholes, as babies in need, let us be refreshed by the Good News of the Gospel that God is always *for* us and we are justified by his grace alone.

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