



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

17TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

GENESIS 2: 18-24

HEBREWS 1: 1-4, 2:5-12

MARK 10: 2-16

PSALM 8

A SERMON BY THE REV. BO REYNOLDS

OCTOBER 03, 2021

“But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.”

IN the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
AMEN

There are occasions in the gospels which set your teeth on edge. Jesus says something which clashes violently with what we understand elsewhere to be his message or his message crashes into our modern lives in a very disruptive way. Over the years, I’ve made an effort to lean into the hard texts, to not allow myself to wriggle off the hook, and instead square up and try to engage with his words head on. I’ve found great discomfort and great value in this practice the longer I’ve engaged in it.

But today I do not think that approach works for this text today. I’ll stress that this is not only because of the visceral incompatibility of Jesus’ perceived stance on divorce in this passage.

To take Jesus’ words literally here, though I must note, would be to force many spouses back into an abusive, unhealthy, or soul-crushing relationship. I, like many of you, am all too familiar with the destructive force of well-intentioned but mishandled advice on divorce, marriages which simply will not end their toxic life cycle only because “Jesus said so.” I’ll also add that a glib disposal of married life can have equally harmful, if different, repercussions. I suppose what I intend to say on the matter of marriage and divorce is that a one-line,

one-size fits all answer simply doesn't work with the complexities of human relationship.

But thankfully, I don't believe Jesus is actually teaching about marriage or divorce or adultery at all here today.

This might strike you as a cheeky proposition on my part, just read the words on the page before us you might say, but I think the context of this teaching will help us understand it in a new light.

It's helpful to remember that while many things Jesus taught were prompted by questions from the crowd or the religious authorities, Jesus never waited for the right question to arise in order to teach something which was truly central to the core of his message. His teachings on human marriage and divorce generally only arise in the context of a series of questions set as traps by the religious authorities of his day, intending to cause Jesus to say something which would run afoul of Moses.

Matthew 5, Matthew 19, and Mark 10 which we're reading from today are the three major texts on divorce which people will point to in order to define Jesus' instructions on the matter. Matthew 19 is essentially a retelling of what we have here in Mark: The question of divorce is not an inquiry; Matthew and Mark tell us it's a trap. It is undeniable that Jesus holds up the union of Adam and Eve in Genesis as an expression of God's desire for the unique bond of human love, regardless of gender I would stress, but Jesus also then uses the authorities' trap as the basis for a teaching on something

quite different.

You see, the religious authorities have a second question spring-loaded after Jesus refers to the Garden of Eden. “Aha!” they say. “Moses wrote that we could write a certificate of divorce!” And Jesus replies “Because of the hardness of your heart...”.

The religious authorities don’t actually care about marriage or divorce here. Rather, they exemplify a sort of spiritual scorekeeping, a malicious fastidiousness with keeping the letter of the law for their own self-justification even if what they condone breaks the spirit of the law. “Well, am I allowed to do what I want if it falls under *these specific circumstances*? What about *now*?”

Jesus has absolutely no patience with this search for spiritual loopholes. God is not some headmaster to be hoodwinked into sanctioning mischievous behavior; there’s no conning God. When Jesus fires back his response to the religious authorities, he’s attacking the very motivation which prompted the question in the first place.

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” when his disciples then pick up the thread.

I’ll offer a re-reading with a slightly different flavor: “ If your intention is to leave your spouse for someone else, or to fulfill only your selfish desires with no regard for how your actions impact another person, you are still spiritually unfaithful.” Doesn’t matter if you checked the boxes, followed the rules, crossed your spiritual I’s and dotted your spiritual T’s. If your motivation in following a spiritual law is only for your own self-fulfillment, you might as well have committed the “sin” you were trying to avoid.

I, for one, am very good at self-justification. “It was the kinder thing just to cut that person loose...” or “I’m taking this, but I’m sure I’ll put it to better use than the other person...” or “Other people will benefit from my own success in the end; what’re a few cracked eggs to make an omelette?” I wriggle and squirm on the hook of my own conscience, knowing that I am simply being self-serving but desperate for some relief from the Holy Spirit, until I find some altruistic sheen to cover my actions and offer some sort of moral justification.

But this will not do in the kingdom of Heaven. God is not some score-keeping tallyman in the sky; God is not interested in how many laws you fulfill or how many boxes you check, especially if your heart's not in the right place. Jesus does not demand obedience; Jesus requires

transformation. My rule-following is worth nothing if it's motivated by an uneasy heart seeking to slink along just this side of what is right.

Jesus in Matthew 5, the third of these three divorce texts, lays out a similar teaching on divorce in a wider context which reinforces this meaning.

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven...

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’...But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council...

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart...

It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Citizens of the kingdom of Heaven are not identified by their fastidiousness or their obedience. Jesus here in Matthew 5 places his instruction on divorce in a broader

setting which helps highlight the true meaning. Christians are not to be the people whose spiritual lives are governed by a careful balancing of the metaphorical ledger. Instead, they are identified, in the words of Howard Thurman, by a complete and devastating sincerity.

Understanding Jesus' teaching in this framework unlocks the meaning of his interaction with the little children at the end of this portion of Mark 10, an event which otherwise feels like an abrupt non sequitur. The presence of the children and Jesus' statement "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" are intentional counters to the religious authorities and the disciples who approach God with wariness and calculation. This will not do, says Jesus. Rather, approach God as a child approaching their loving parent: Guards down, filled with simple trust and honest intention. Honesty and transparency, even vulnerability which others might reject as naive, sincerity: This is the spiritual posture of a disciple of Jesus.

Maybe you approach God from a calculated distance because you've been told God is vengeful and ready to punish, or that God is always watching, always taking note of your faults, Big Brother is the sky.

But this is not the God Jesus comes to reveal. Jesus taught us to call God 'Abba', literally father but more accurately, Papa. There is intimacy, affection, and relationship present here.

Our is a God who waits with outstretched arms and a joyful heart, a God whose perfect Love casts out all fear, alienation, and separation. This is a God who loves you deeply, who knows you by name.

Next time you pray, trust that you are encountering a God who you can rely on, one who finds deep joy in relationship with you. Imagine yourself as a child, enfolded in the embrace of a loving guardian. Know that this is the posture with which God greets you, and allow yourself, for just a moment, to let your barriers fall. Complete and devastating sincerity as a child of God.

Amen.

**THE CHURCH OF ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
487 HUDSON STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10014**

TEL: 212.924.0562

FAX: 212. 633.2098

WEBSITE: WWW.STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG

EMAIL: INFO@STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG