

**Sermon preached by Rev. Karen Freeman on October 7th 2018, Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Psalm 26;
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16**

As this is my first sermon here, I thought I would say a bit about how I usually approach sermon writing. Some of you may know, but some may not, our readings are set by the Revised Common Lectionary, which gives bible readings from the Old Testament, Psalms, New Testament and a Gospel reading, to cover most of the bible over a 3-year cycle – years A, B & C. This year we are in Year B. The great thing about following this Lectionary is that it's used by the vast majority of mainline protestant churches, and so many Christians are hearing and reflecting on the same bible readings each week. When I begin preparing a sermon, I like to try and find a connection between the different set readings... often there will be something that holds them all together, though sometimes that's hard to discover. I've decided today's connection is the theme of **“Learning through Change”**.

Life brings people through many changes, some difficult and some easier – some are tragic and some joyful. I believe God wants us to learn from all the inevitable changes of life. Through my recent move, I am learning a lot about myself, my faith, my family and about God's providence and love.

Many of the things God allows to happen to us have the purpose of teaching us more about God. For example, with Job. The text says that Job was blameless and upright. But through the story of Job and all the changes and challenges that he is confronted with as Satan devastates his life, we see Job's capacity within himself to be 'at odds' with God, arguing with God and questioning God's goodness, justice and wisdom; in fact, later in the book of Job, he becomes aware of the capacity within himself to believe evil about God. Through his adversities, Job learns so much about himself and about God, eventually he humbly repents of his sin.

Life means growth, and growth means change. We can respond to change in a positive way by growing and learning – or we can resist change by hardening our

minds and hearts. Job had to learn a hard lesson through the changes he experienced as a result of Satan's torment of him. Change can be extremely stressful, but learning and growing closer to God can be a consequence of change, if we're open to the experience.

How do you feel about change? How do you feel about learning?

In our New Testament passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews, the writer reminds the people of Israel that a change has occurred. God spoke to them in the past mainly through his prophets – they had been through many changes which humbled them and taught them about God's love for them and God's providence and justice and mercy. Now the writer of Hebrews is telling them God has spoken through a Son who is Jesus the Messiah. This made a significant change in the way that God communicated to his people – now through Jesus Emmanuel who is 'God with us'.

In our Gospel passage from Mark, Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees about marriage and divorce, and he challenges their traditional thinking. The way Jesus was teaching about God seemed to the Pharisees like a change from what they had always thought. But Jesus is like that – he challenged them and he challenges us to think more deeply about what God is really like – not just the 'letter of the law', but the spirit in which God's laws were given, where grace, mercy and peace overrule legalistic judgment.

The Mark passage is hard. Many people have faced very challenging marital circumstances, and divorce rates are pretty high among Christians as well as non-Christians. Marriage is intended to be a lifelong commitment – not many people enter into it thinking that it won't last! Marriage presents a big change in the lives of those who are joined in matrimony. Marriage is meant to be a way that people commit to each other's flourishing. It's meant to be life-giving. Marriage is a union of two people – it's a reflection of the union between Christ and the Church. In the bible, God and Christ are frequently likened to a husband, as the Church is to a wife. "One flesh" indicates a relationship as close as a blood

relative. Marriage should not be entered into lightly – nor should it be dissolved lightly.

Jesus admits that Moses allowed divorce because people are hard-hearted (v 5). What does it mean to be hard-hearted? Stubborn; resistant to change; like a stone; cold, immovable, mean, closed-up; unyielding; a person who does not consider the needs of ‘the other’. Sometimes in marriage (as in life) we learn truths about our self or about the other person that we didn’t realize before – sometimes good truths and sometimes awful. Sometimes we are hard-hearted; sometimes our spouse is. When it’s bad, the challenge then is to keep faith in God – and to rest in our identity as a child of God, who loves us unconditionally.

The bible places a high value on the marriage commitment, but apart from what Moses allowed, we can find two further instances where allowance for divorce is made – the first in Matthew 19:9, where sexual promiscuity is given as an allowance by Jesus, and secondly in 1 Cor 7 where Paul allows for divorce when a believing spouse is abandoned by their unbelieving spouse.

So God doesn’t want us to rush into divorce for just any reason, like if your spouse leaves off the cap of the toothpaste tube, but what about more serious situations such as domestic violence? If one in the marriage partnership is abusive towards the other, I believe that violates the terms of a “one flesh” covenant. It is hard-hearted to expect someone to remain in an abusive relationship of any sort.

We have to look at the spirit behind the law, and what we know about God’s care for us. God loves us and so I do not believe God requires us to stay in a marriage where we have been betrayed. Unfaithfulness can manifest in many guises and can rightly be seen as a violation of God’s intention for a healthy “one flesh” union.

The Christian writer and counsellor Leslie Vernick believes that chronic hardness-of-heart qualifies as grounds for divorce – when there is no repentance or willingness to look at that problem and how it has affected the marital bond - as is

any serious sin issue that can also breach the marital bond which has been intended from the beginning to be life-giving, not soul-destroying.

And God doesn't want us to be weighed down with shame over our past mistakes. The 1st letter of John chapter 1:9 states that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse us from our wickedness.

All marriages go through difficult phases. The marriage bond should only be broken for the most severe reasons and with God's guidance, wise counselling and prayer. If divorce occurs and is later regretted, often it's too late to get a second chance with the same person, especially if re-marriage has occurred - but we can always work toward a degree of forgiveness, reconciliation and peace, with God's grace.

So, learning through change is important. Life is change – and God wants us to learn from change. It is life-long learning. Amen.