

18th Sunday after Pentecost – B (Proper 22)
Text – Mark 10:5-7a

And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male & female. Therefore a man shall leave his father & mother & hold fast to his wife, & the two shall become one flesh.’”

BECAUSE OF YOUR HARDNESS OF HEART

A husband decided to buy his mother-in-law a cemetery plot as a Christmas gift. The next year, he didn’t buy her a gift at all so she asked him why. He said, “It’s quite simple, you still haven’t used the gift I bought you last year!”

Jokes about the evil mother-in-law are rather common, & sometimes may even play a role in a subsequent divorce. Today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark is frequently cited in arguments against divorce, yet, looking at the context, that doesn’t appear to be the main point of Jesus’ teaching. Hardness of heart is not confined to the relationship of marriage.

Children at school, coworkers & siblings all struggle with it. Neighbors, church members & pastors have plenty of opportunity to harden their opinions regarding any # of different people, & issues. Whenever you feel like giving someone a piece of your mind, right or wrong, your heart has already set, like cement, on your view of the circumstances.

That’s the situation Jesus encounters in today’s Gospel lesson: “Pharisees came up & in order to test Him asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’” The Pharisees were already convinced that it was because Moses had allowed provision for it in the book of Deuteronomy. The argument among the Jewish people merely revolved around the grounds for such a divorce.

That doesn’t seem to hold much of a test for Jesus, as He clearly states, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment... What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” God is not at all in the business of encouraging divorce, no matter what the reasons. Divorce exists only as a direct result of the hardness of human hearts. I think the

Pharisees knew where Jesus stood on this issue, & their trap, or their test, lies literally in where Jesus is physically standing. As they're speaking, He's in a province called Perea. It's under the jurisdiction of King Herod, the same Herod who had John the Baptist imprisoned & then beheaded. Do you remember why?

John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." That wife was Herodias & she didn't take kindly to John the Baptist's words, so she tricked King Herod into taking off John's head. It's likely that the Pharisees are hoping for the same chain of events to occur in Jesus' case.

They ask Him a leading question about divorce hoping Jesus will take that opportunity to preach against it, thus earning the disfavor of King Herod for Himself. As usual, their ploy to entrap Jesus fails because He takes the discussion in a direction they didn't expect, an entirely different, more foundational, direction.

The essence of the text isn't about divorce, but concerns what is at the root of every broken relationship. Because the Pharisees brought it up, divorce is merely the example Jesus uses in order to illustrate what's wrong with our relationship to God, & our relationship to others. The brokenness always boils down to the same thing – our hardness of heart.

That's why a husband might consider buying his mother-in-law a cemetery plot as a Christmas gift. It's why children tease each other in school & don't pay attention in class. It's why men & women pay to have a child aborted. It's why politicians take bribes & why murderers kill. Hardness of heart is why people reject trusting in Jesus for every need.

Evolutionary teaching is about hardening one's heart to the love & the truth revealed in God's Word at Genesis. The recent collapse of the American economy occurred because people have hardened their hearts against relying upon God's plans for providing hope & a future.

People were trying to build their future upon human plans, & human wisdom, & human dreams. Marriage often ends up the same way. A guy I know, who ended up divorced from his 1st wife, likes to say he used the wrong selection criteria in choosing whom to marry the 1st time. The wisdom of our culture says to get married for emotional love, & for physical beauty.

The Bible tells us to live by faith, not by sight, & direct application of that passage can be made to choosing a spouse. In the OT, the priest Ezra stood up & said to the Israelites, “You have broken faith & married foreign women, & so increased the guilt of Israel.” The words ‘you have broken faith’ seem to indicate that their ‘selection criteria’ had nothing to do with Yahweh.

Why would any Christian choose a spouse that has not demonstrated a godly heart? Could it be that they’ve hardened their own heart to the will & the wisdom of God? In choosing a school, a church, a job, a place to live, what to wear, or a spouse, in so many ways, don’t we prefer to use our own selection criteria in place of the Words of Scripture? ***PAUSE***

“Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.” Moses made provision for divorce in response to a deliberate refusal to abide by the will of God, a refusal to submit to one’s spouse. Divorce is about the lesser of two evils. It is not about a preferable way of dealing with your husband or wife.

Divorce was permitted by Moses to curb the sinful actions of a hardened heart, so that the consequences of sin might be minimized. In the OT women could be stoned to death for adultery, so having a certificate of divorce gave protection to a woman whose husband divorced her for ungodly reasons. Those reasons could be as trivial as the wife having served a bad meal.

The Pharisees had been plotting the death of Jesus because He was undermining their authority among the people, & the Pharisees had been keeping their people in line by holding the sins of the people against them. Until our Father in heaven took care of them, your sins & mine

were at the root of all our problems in life, & in death. Until we hear the good news that death has been done away with, Satan continues to hold the sins of the people against them. Jesus described that situation as similar to slavery. It was slavery to sin, slavery to every single one of our corrupt & twisted desires.

Jesus came to release us from our sins & He paid a high price in doing so. The ultimate in hardness of heart is to have heard that news & yet to withhold it from others. That's what the Pharisees had been doing, & doing it for their own personal gain. Because all of us are selfish by nature we too are tempted to withhold forgiveness from others so that we might gain from it.

Our sinful nature sees it as gain when we keep others in a state where they feel they owe it to us to obey our will. Our sinful nature sees it as gain when we allow neighbors, friends & even family to view ourselves as the standard by which all others are to be judged. It would seem that the Pharisees viewed themselves in that way & Jesus was ruining their reputation.

The people were losing respect for the Pharisees because this Jesus was releasing people from their sins, by teaching as one who had authority, & not as their teachers of the Law. Jesus refused to get pulled into petty arguments regarding what was a just reason for a man to divorce his wife. There is no justification. Divorce was allowed only because of hardness of heart.

If a man has hardened his heart against his wife, then he has hardened his heart against God, & that is the real issue that needs to be dealt with. The Pharisees whole debate was focused on how to subvert God's will. Instead, we should be spending our energy on finding solutions to the troubled relationships in this world.

The Son of God, Jesus Christ, is that solution. He is concerned, not so much with the symptoms, like divorce, as with the heart, which is the root of all evil. Jesus doesn't need symptoms to diagnose our illness. The Pharisees are enamored with nothing more than

symptoms. They can't handle the big stuff so they sweat the small stuff. They major in the minors, instead of keeping the main thing, the main thing. Divorce is merely one example of hardness of heart. How many times in our lives have we hardened our hearts against another person in any way, shape or form?

That's why the Son of Almighty God took on human flesh & blood in order that He might sacrifice them, His own body, on our behalf, because our hearts are evil. His heart was given in order that our heart might be changed for all of eternity. We see only the barest glimpse of that result here in this life, & that means belief in Jesus is about trusting His promises.

The question "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" is not at all the correct question. The question should be, "Is it lawful to be hardhearted?" & the clear answer is no. The clear solution is Jesus, our Lord & Savior who came to open His heart to our suffering in order that we might be healed. That healing process begins with Baptism.

Do you believe the promises of God associated with that Sacrament? Or is your heart hard against something so irrational, something so based upon faith alone & not upon sight? Sinners are ugly people if you look only at the things they do. Our Father in heaven looks at the things Jesus did, His life of perfection, & then He credits those deeds as if they were our own.

That is the essence of salvation & believing that we can look at others, not with hearts of stone, but with hearts softened by the trials & sufferings we endure in this life. The reading from Hebrews pointed out that even the Son of God was:

"...made like his brothers in every respect, so that He might become a merciful & faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." The people are you & I. We have been forgiven. Our sins have been erased. We've been set free from the burden of guilt & shame that weighs us down when we harden our hearts. We can breathe again,

& love each other, even if we don't always see eye to eye, even if we don't even enjoy each other's company. We are all equal in that Jesus died for each of us, because He loved us & wants to change our hearts through His sacrifice. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all human understanding will guard your hearts & your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.