

The Law of Love
October 2, 1994
Jody Ondich

There are some lessons that are very tempting to ignore, whitewash, or just plain skip. This one, this year, for me, is one of those. But I spent time on this this week at a two day workshop in Brainard, and one of the things that became very clear to me was that this was a real chance for me to share with you some very important and fresh thoughts on this issue. I also knew that I would lose out if I didn't preach on this Mark passage. So, with some fear, but no apologies, here we go.

This is another one of those passages where the religious authorities are coming in order to tempt and test Jesus.

They come with a point that is under debate for its details, and throw it into Jesus' lap. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" This isn't really the issue, you see. In Hebrew law it is laid out very clearly that it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Deuteronomy has the laws with their reasons all laid out, and any religious authority worth his salt at the time would know that. The issue at the time was, "What are the reasons that can be given for divorce?" They are expecting Jesus to take a stand, but they do not expect the stand that Jesus does take. Jesus does to them what he has done repeatedly all through the gospel. He tells them that although Moses writes the law as allowing divorce, that it was not God's will that this

happen. Jesus intensifies the law, making it, instead of a law to be obeyed, God's will to be followed. This has happened before, when the Pharisees ask about killing and the law. Jesus intensifies the prohibition by saying not only may you not kill, but that even being angry at one another is breaking God's will. And the same thing happens over the issue of adultery--that even looking at another person with lust is breaking away from God's will for humanity. Jesus continually ups the ante for humanity. He takes the law, written to be obeyed, and focuses it, tightens it, makes it much clearer. And it becomes just about impossible to follow.

It is very clear that Jesus wants these legalistic Pharisees to understand that divorce is wrong. But he wants them to understand, even more, that marriage is a gift from God, a gift of grace, a union unlike any other among humankind. They were searching, these Pharisees, for ways to gain a divorce for easy, simple, unimportant reasons. And in that day and age, a woman without a male in charge of her was in real economic and social trouble. Jesus wanted to emphasize the importance of marriage ties.

And they are important. We take vows in our lives only a few times. In Christian lives we take vows when we have a child baptized. We take vows when we are confirmed. And we take vows when we are married. There are a few other times

in people's lives, such as entering the military, or serving on a jury, or witnessing in court. but the times of giving our word are few indeed, and not taken lightly.

I am convinced that this intensifying of hebrew law is for two reasons. One is to push the trivializers of the law so that they might return to the basic level of it. And the other is to show people that even when these laws were written, it was clear that people didn't always keep them, and couldn't even always keep them.

So then what? If we are judged by our ability to keep the law, all of it, according to the highest standards of the faith, then we all fail. All of us. We get angry. We even kill. We long for other people's possessions, and sometimes even steal to get them. We neglect or put down our parents. We make excuses to get around all of the law that we find difficult. But there the law remains, a judge and a condemnation for our lives.

What can we say to this?

But I also read the rest of the gospel. Jesus is asked, in a whole variety of places, what the greatest commandment is. What is the ultimate law? And he always responds in the same way. "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and all of your soul, and all of your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. On this hangs all of the law and the prophets." The ultimate law is to love. All other laws are to be judged on the basis of this one. In any given

situation, the lesser law is to be obeyed if it is
consistant with the law of love, and superseded if it isn't.

A legalistic religion like the Pharisees' is in some ways
very appealing. All you have to do in any kind of ethical
dilemma is look it up in the book and act accordingly.
Jesus, on the other hand, says all you have to do is love
God and your neighbors. That may be more appealing still,
until, in dilemma after dilemma, you try to figure out just
how to go about doing that. The difficulty is increased when
you realize that by loving God and your neighbors, Jesus
doesn't mean love as primarily a feeling. Instead he seems
to mean that whether any feeling is involved or not, loving
God means honoring and obeying and staying in constant touch
with God, and that loving your neighbor means acting in
their best interests no matter what, even if personally you
don't like them.

And nothing illustrates the difficulty of this loving thing
better than the situation of divorce between people who take
their faith seriously. Divorce is a failure, a brokenness,
an inability to follow the law. I don't believe that
divorce is choosing to do evil, however. Most of the time,
it is a failure to do good. But noone in their right mind
sees divorce as anything other than awful. ~~[And the law says~~

~~that, by and large, it is wrong.]~~ *It stresses everyone involved,
it changes peoples' lives - and it hurts.*

The Christian faith is not based on the law alone, however.
The faith is based on an act of such grace, such love, such

overwhelming giving, that no matter what the brokenness, no matter what the pain or suffering or failure or sin, grace and love and forgiveness are offered. Obedience to the law is to be desired. But grace is offered to anyone who wants to open their hands and receive it. Law exacts obedience. Grace creates a relationship.

This passage ends with what seems like an abrupt change of subject. Jesus rebukes his disciples because they have been keeping the little children away from him, and because the disciples have given their parents a hard time for presuming to bring them to Jesus. He reaches out and touches them, and tells the disciples that whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child does not stand a chance of entering that kingdom. Children are, in the Jewish faith, unable to follow the law, are not "of the age of the law". And these are the ones to follow, to imitate? Why? What is it that they have that we need to have in order to be part of God's reign? I believe that children are unselfconscious, are receptive, and are content to be dependant on another's strength, care and bounty. If you tell a child, in the words of Frederick Buechner, that there is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, that child will probably be willing to at least go check it out! Children have the ability to accept love and grace and any other good thing that we might give them. They don't wonder whether they deserve it, they just accept it, and usually with great joy. Maybe these pieces go together after all. Accepting

grace and forgiveness, whether or not we deserve them, whether or not we think that we have earned them, brings us into the realm of God.

The symbols of that grace, love, and forgiveness lay on our table today. Breads from all over the world show the universality of sin and brokenness, and the universality of love and acceptance and grace. The son of God died for the one who gets angry and the one who kills, the one who covets and the one who steals, the one on the fringes, and the one divorced. The son of God gives us all the mercy and joy that we need. May we come to this table with the receptiveness of a child, so that God's grace, which is abundant, may feed our very souls. Amen