

First Trinity/St Matthew's Lutheran Church
October 7, 2018
Mark 10: 2-16

Being kind, tenderhearted and forgiving in hate filled times

One of the joys of being a pastor is being involved in conducting the wedding service for a couple, who at the time of the service, are very much in love. It is almost a fairytale moment with beautiful dresses, tuxedos, flowers, candles, and parties. Family and friends gather and all seem right with the world. I am firmly convinced that of the many couples whose wedding service I have been a part of, none of them approached the wedding thinking that this will never last. I think at that moment they are all convinced that for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and health, that only death will be able to separate them from each other. But we know that for many there will be the pain and struggle that will lead to divorce.

This first part of the tenth chapter of Mark is a challenge to preach when almost everyone listening has been through a divorce, or had a loved one or a family member that has been through that painful experience. It is so easy to hear these as words of judgment and condemnation. But let us hear them as message from Jesus that marriage is a very important promise that two human beings make to each other and that in a perfect world we keep our promises. But as a pastor, I know there are times when divorce is the only route left to be taken and at times it is in the best solution in a very difficult situation.

What Jesus is doing is recognizing a terrible fact; we humans can and do separate what God has united. We humans can and do fracture God's handiwork. We can just look at the environment as an example of how we have messed up. The Good News is that God does not leave us. God's mercy and grace is a free gift for all of us. Too many times, we who have not been through the pain and struggle of divorce are more like the Pharisees in our Gospel reading. They were not really interested in hearing what Jesus had to say, rather they were interested in trying to trip him up.

The historical context of this reading is that King Herod had stolen his half-brother King Philip's wife Queen Herodias. It had been quite the royal scandal of the day. It was the sordid story of one brother going to another brother's house, having a secret affair with his wife and actually being able to steal her away. At the time of the passage Queen Herodias had divorced King Philip and married King Herod Antipas; her former brother-in-law. It was all a rather messy business.

You may also remember that it was around the time of Queen Herodias' affair, divorce and remarriage that Jesus' cousin John the Baptist had spoken out quite strongly against the immorality of the situation. He was first put into prison and then later he was beheaded because of the whole sordid mess.

And now, the Pharisees saw their chance to push Jesus into the soup so to speak. If they could get Jesus to say something incriminating about divorce perhaps they could take that and twist it just enough to make it seem as if Jesus was attacking King Herod. And

if they could do that than just perhaps they could get Jesus arrested and put into prison. Jesus of course, spotted the trap a mile off. He knew what was going on in their hearts.

On a daily basis we experience the constant trials that can happen because of sickness, disease, interpersonal relationships and circumstances of life. This has been a difficult week in America I think it has been especially difficult for women and men who have been sexually abused or sexually harassed. Those who have been abused should feel safe to tell their story without being criticized, mocked, or ridiculed. If they chose not to share their story for whatever reason then that needs to be respected as well.

We were not created to deal with all the sin that is in our world. When our God created us it wasn't for us to have to battle the pains, the struggles and the trials that come with a sin laden world. Our physical bodies and our spiritual bodies were not designed to handle sin. We were not created to hurt one another We were not created to be selfish, greedy, materialistic and all that stuff. This is what happened to us when we embraced sin.

Many years ago, a distinguished anthropologist went to live in a Bantu village in Southern Africa. The village was very isolated and primitive. The people were very superstitious. He had feared going there, but he found them a very warm and welcoming people. When he returned home to the United States, he wanted to send them a gift of appreciation. In his time with them, he had noticed they had no means of telling time so he decided to send them a sundial. When he returned later, he found

they had built a thatched hut to protect their gift from the rain and the sun. It was thus rendered useless.

So with our faith, the real test is not when everything is going our way, but during the worst of times when God's light of grace seems to be absent in our lives. We must trust and hope in the dark moments that the power of God's light will shine again in our lives. For indeed it has not left; we have only lost our ability to perceive it. We have simply allowed our lives to be shielded from the light of God's love. We must not let our anger, our frustrations, our hurts, or our pains block us from the brightness of God's love.

In the same Gospel story today Jesus shifts the topic to children. Despite their low social status in that society Jesus loved them and we wanted to be around them. Jesus is showing his openness to all. Jesus also talks about how children are accepting and loving. It doesn't take a child long to realize if the people around them love them, accept them and want to care for them. In our passage they know that Jesus loves them. Jesus is this perfect picture of both strength and vulnerability. Jesus is open, sensitive and righteous.

All of this leads us to asking the question - What can we do to keep our hearts tender, pure, holy and open like children? Jesus invites us to be healed through love. To be healed through the power of confession, forgiveness, grace and mercy. It is amazing what happens when we receive forgiveness and in return grant forgiveness. The way to have a hard heart is to allow bitterness to grow in our heart which of course

leads to possessing a spirit of malice and revenge. When we do that we allow the Devil to come in and create a monster within us that in the end will destroy.

The Apostle Paul reminds us in Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

We come this morning to receive from the LORD His grace, His mercy and His love in the form of bread and wine. We come giving to the LORD our hard hearts, our cynicism, our judgmental attitudes and our apathy. We come asking the LORD to renew our hearts - to make them tender towards Him and towards others. We come asking the LORD to renew us and help us to become authentic human beings who will reflect God's Glory and Honor.

Today, you again are invited to come to the Table. Allow the Holy Spirit to lead you, cleanse you and renew you today. Then let us go forth and be Jesus to our World with hearts that are tender and kind - hearts that are open and receptive, and hearts that are obedient and loving. Amen