

Mission Impossible?

Colleagues:

Asked many weeks ago to preach for a Mission Festival at two rural congregations in southern Illinois this coming weekend, Ed planned (as is his wont) to base the sermon on the gospel prescribed for the day in the Revised Common Lectionary. It was a bit of a jolt for him to discover the incongruity of that Sunday's gospel with a Mission Festival. So he thought of the title above. The text is Mark 10: 2-16. The first part shows the Pharisees trying to stump Jesus by asking about the lawfulness of divorce. Moses allowed men to divorce wives if they put it in writing, they told Jesus. Jesus replies that Moses wrote that because of their hardness of heart. But it wasn't that way from the beginning. After the Pharisees left Jesus had more words about divorce for his disciples, saying whoever divorces a spouse is involved in adultery.

But suddenly the scene changes, and the second half of the pericope shows Jesus welcoming little children and blessing them, fussing mightily at the disciples who had tried to shoo them away. These children, Jesus said as he took them in his arms (you can just imagine him with several of them on his lap), are right smack in the middle of God's new regime.

So what does any of that have to do with Christian mission?

It didn't take a lot of study (thanks, Holy Spirit) to realize there's good material there after all. What follows is the sermon he typed with his impaired vision when he thought he could still preach it himself. Given his present condition, of which you've probably seen my recent update, that's no longer possible. But it might be useful instead as a Thursday Theology posting.

Peace & Joy!
Marie

How can you get to a Festival for Christian Mission from this text?
MISSION?
IMPOSSIBLE!

But maybe not.

In John's Gospel there is a mission command from Jesus right at the end of his book. It comes on Easter Sunday evening when the disciples are all behind locked doors for fear. Jesus tells them: As the Father sent me, so I send you.

The Father sent Jesus into the world of the first paragraph of this Markan text in order to do the job of the second paragraph, namely, to get all of us onto Jesus' lap.

Yes, for us grown-ups that's childish sounding. But even we goldie oldies can remember our good feelings when it happened to us years ago.

And especially in John's Gospel, being on Jesus' lap is even better still. For John often locates Jesus on the Father's lap. Many times Jesus himself says that he's "in the bosom of the Father." Yes, father with a bosom. Well, if God is holding Jesus like this, then Jesus must be on the Father's lap. And if we then get onto Jesus' lap, look where we're sitting!

Christ's mission is to help people move from the first paragraph of this text to the second. Jesus says to us (in his

lap): Well, that's your mission too. As the Father sent me to get you onto my lap, I send you to get other folks who are still stuck out there someplace onto my lap alongside of you. And in those words on Easter Sunday evening in John's Gospel, Jesus says how such a transfer happens. "If and when you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you don't do it, it won't happen."

Clearly the folks outside there are sinners. To get them to become forgiven sinners is to put them into Jesus' lap. To help them stay there is what Christian faith is all about: letting Jesus hang on to you – maybe even hanging onto Jesus with your own hands, especially since you know who's hanging on to him, whose lap he's on.

And for that you don't have to go to Africa or Asia. Wherever paragraph one is happening, that's a mission field. This county, your town, is a mission field. At this very moment the four walls of this church are the borders of a mission field. If sinners walked through that door into church this morning, then we are a mission field. I know of at least one who walked into church like that, your preacher. Marie and I have been protected from divorce now for half a century, but we know it in our families: two of my brothers, one of her sisters.

And in this first paragraph of the text, it doesn't even need to get to divorce, Jesus says: We can be suffering from hardness of heart – that simply means NOT forgiving – and we all know what that is, maybe even with the person you're sitting next to in the pew.

We've got a mailman up in St. Louis whose marriage is in trouble. He's told us. There happen to be three retired ELCA pastors in our condo bldg. He sees the mail we get. He knows we're preacher-types. So he's talked to at least two of us when

we happen to meet him by the mailboxes. Both he and his wife are Christians and want to stay that way. "Forgiveness" is the hardest part, he says. "I know that's the answer, but it's so tough."

This is a tough text about divorce. True. But divorce is not some super sin. It's just a sharp example of God's old creation falling apart. That's why God sent Moses with the emergency legislation about it. Sometimes folks haven't noticed that Moses with his rules for divorce was sent as God's agent for temporary relief. Moses' rules for divorce are not contradicting God's blueprint for marriage way back there in the beginning in Genesis. Not at all. The original blueprints came with the specs for non-sinners. When you get sinners into the world it won't always work. So God's Moses is authorized BY GOD to cope with the new situation. Don't cure it, just make it possible to carry on without even more chaos and hatred, or even more people killing each other.

So what's the "IT" that Moses doesn't cure? The deeper diagnosis that Jesus himself points out. The hardness of hearts.

Divorce is surface symptom.

Heart-disease, thinking "I won't forgive – or, even though I want to, I can't" – is the deeper sickness.

And the heart in Bible language is the God-box, God's turf within us. That's an even deeper diagnosis of sickness than just having an unforgiving heart: a heart that's hard toward my spouse – or toward anybody else.

That's a God-sclerosis, and none of us can fix our own God-sclerosis.

There is a choice in the matter. Regularly the NT says: "If you choose to live by unforgiveness with your fellow-sinner, then you are inviting me (God) to act the same way with you." In the Bible that's called Hell. Who can rescue us from such a pronouncement?

You know what it took to get US into Jesus' lap. It was Jesus himself who died and rose again for us. He rescued the hard-hearted from our God-sclerosis (and remember, that's every one of us who has ever said – or is saying it right now – "It's so hard to forgive").

Climbing onto Jesus' lap is listening to his word of forgiveness and trusting it. We all know that forgiveness is a word of life, in contrast to the death that always happens when you don't forgive. If you admit that you are a sinner, then it's just plain stupid NOT to grab onto God's forgiveness for yourself and to pass it on to the folks who sin against you. We probably often don't think what we're saying in the Lord's Prayer: Forgive us our sins, AS we forgive those who sin against us. We're saying: God, the alternative is Hell. Don't deal with us THAT way. Crack open our hearts so we don't live that way either with the folks near and dear to us. Keep us in Jesus' lap.

Now back into the real world where divorces happen, where Moses' rules apply. Where hardness of heart keeps popping up – also in me and in my spouse, and our kids, etc.

Well, one thing at least is different, when we've come this far. We've got a new location for living out our marriage – and for other things we do or say. We're managing our lives from Jesus' lap.

And when you're in Jesus' lap, what two parts of the two of you are almsot touching? The two hearts! I can't give you the specs

for your marriage. Finally, that's not my job. Mine is to get the specs for my own. But you can do it for yourself – and if you need help, check with the fellow Christian you're married to, to see if you get similar messages. Since you are “one flesh” with Christ's heart pounding just inches away, the new reality is “one heart.” Sounds like one conversation. I know it's maybe embarrassing for grown-ups to talk about being in someone's lap, but if Jesus is not ashamed to say that he (as a grown man) was sitting in the Father's lap, why should we?

There may still be turmoil in the marriage, but if hard hearts have been replaced, that's a quantum leap away from the first paragraph of today's Bible text.

Oh, yes, almost forgot.

It's Mission Festival.

I bet you could add the last couple paragraphs to this sermon yourself and do the mission part.

1. The mission field is anyplace that looks like the first paragraph of today's text.
2. Christ's mission – ours too – is to get people back in the Father's lap by getting them to sit on Christ's lap. Remember what happened there: HE BLESSED THEM. “Blessed” in the Bible means to be put back in the right place. He didn't give the kiddies candy. He got them back to the Father from whom they had strayed far, far away.

Wherever folks are far away from the one Jesus called Father, there's the mission field. We've seen that it's right inside the place where we are this morning. And it goes to the four corners of the earth.

There is no place that is NOT a mission field on the face of the earth. That goes especially also for our country – which is

so full of religion.

The issue is not: Are people religious? Nor even: do they call themselves Christian? But listen to how they talk, how they act. Do they show that they are sitting on Jesus' lap? That's the simple dipstick.

And if not, they too are mission field. And if you are somewhere near and they can hear you – and they are willing to hear you – tell them what we just went through these past 20 minutes. You may be inclined to say: What, ME a missionary! No way! But hang on a second.

Marie and I were in Ethiopia 11 years ago as ELCA global mission volunteers. There we learned that everybody in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (it's a Lutheran church) knows this: If you're baptized you're a missionary. Who's the best person to help someone get onto Jesus' lap? Someone who's already sitting there. As the Father sent me, so I send you.

Mission is that simple. But you've got to start doing it at home to really get hooked on it, and then you'll be energized to pitch in to make it happen all over the world. It happened that in all the places where we were in our years as global mission volunteers, we rarely had the opportunity to talk to non-Christians. But we found that our fellow-Christians in the congregations were the ones in need. Just as you here in your own county, or on the farm, may be surrounded by fellow-Christians, but you might be able to see that they are the ones in need. With your help, Jesus may be able to pick them up, too, and bless them.

Remember how simple the specs are: Christian mission moves folks from the first paragraph of this text to the second paragraph: away from hard-heartedness into the lap of Jesus.

When it's happened to you, you can offer it to others. That's Christ's mission strategy for the whole world. As the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us.