

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

DOING AND UNDOING “THE SPLITS”

Mark 10:2-16

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)

Analysis by Eric W. Evers

2Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” 3He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” 4They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” 5But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 6But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ 7‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, 8and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

10Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; 12and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

13People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15Truly I tell you,

whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” 16And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

DIAGNOSIS: Divided

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Splitsville*

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Mark tells us this was asked under false pretense; it was a test. Perhaps the Pharisees sought to catch Jesus between “family values” and a “literal understanding” of the Law. But their question betrays far more of their intentions than they could know. Look how it is framed; they might as well have asked, “Jesus, what can we get away with?” Not “what is good,” or “how can a husband and wife best love and serve each other,” but “what is permitted?” What are the limits? This is hardly a healthy approach for either marriage or children (a connection suggested especially by Mark’s juxtaposition of the divorce question and the blessing of the children).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hard-Hearted*

Jesus addresses the inner problem, though. It’s not about who can end a marriage. It’s about hardness of heart. And to whom is this accusation directed? Jesus says, “because of your hardness of heart...” Israel’s? Men’s? The religious leaders’? Whose hearts are being accused by Jesus? Of course, the answer is, ultimately, all of ours. It isn’t just that we treat marriage lightly. It’s that we are stubbornly set in our selfish ways. We look at others as means to the end of our own happiness and pleasant satisfaction. And so, in our hardness of heart, we look at others as disposable when they no longer meet our felt needs. Moses gave a concession, trying to bring some restraint to a fallen human condition, which the “good religious folks” tried

to turn into permission for self-serving use, and dismissal, of others.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Excluded*

Such hard-hearted, self-serving people can hardly be child-like receivers of the free gift of God's kingdom, and so shall not enter it (10:15). This is blanket condemnation. Our casual approach to relationships is merely a symptom of our deeply self-serving nature. This nature is fundamentally incompatible with God's kingdom, and so he excludes those who have it, meaning all of us.

PROGNOSIS: Reunited

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *A New Union*

But there's another marriage at work here, a much happier union. We who are so willing to separate ourselves from what the Father intended now find ourselves captured by a new love. Christ comes and becomes our soul's bridegroom. He embraces adulterers, divorcees, and sinners of all stripes in his mercy. What is ours – our sin and rejection, becomes his, upon the Cross. And what is his – righteousness and the joy of the kingdom, becomes ours by faith. God has put Christ and the sinner together, a happy exchange.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Childlike Receivers*

So now the quest for "what we can get away with" can cease. We don't have to worry about seeing how far we can push the law and still justify ourselves. We have been justified! Instead of chasing loopholes, we can pursue love. In Christ, we can see others as fellow human beings, rather than tools for our own happiness. Instead of fighting for our own justification and satisfaction, we can receive these, and all good gifts, as thankful children.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Blessed and Blessing*

Let us return, then, to the presenting problem: what is the “righteous” approach to marriage and divorce? As child-like receivers, we are not the manufacturers of our own “happy” or “successful” marriages; good marriage is a gift. It is a work of God, something which God has “joined together.” We receive it, but we do not control it. And that means when the gift does not conform to our expectations, rather than viewing this as a threat to our right to happiness, we can see the cruciform shape of struggle as an opportunity to have our wills conformed to God’s. Even the most rooted in Christ will likely struggle on this road; even the most patient and prayerful may not “hold it together.” When this tragic outcome does occur, we dare not cast stones. Instead, we know that we can cast these persons onto the care of Christ, which will never be separated from them. As fellow sinners, we can point them to the holy bridegroom who blesses even the unrighteous. In a community such as this, all will find that when the suffering of this sinful age seems worst, Christ is most powerfully present. We cannot be separated from his righteousness. Let us cling to him. Whether it is in the giving of strength to persevere or grace to the one who stumbles, Jesus will not leave us, nor will he cease making his righteousness our own.