

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel, Year B

IN THE ARMS OF JESUS

Mark 10:2-16

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Steve Albertin

2 Some Pharisees came, and to test [Jesus] they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" 3 He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" 4 They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." 5 But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 6 But 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, 8 and the two shall become one flesh.' So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

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

13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14 But 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 too such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." 16 And he took them up in his arms,

laid his hands on them, and blessed them.



DIAGNOSIS: Bad News for Hard Hearts

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): “The Pain of Divorce”

The pain of divorce has wounded all our families. That is what makes Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel so troubling. There is no compromise.

Today’s Gospel begins with another confrontation between Jesus and those guardians of morality, the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the moral conscience of their society. They were the experts in right and wrong. In the case of divorce, they had developed a vast system of rules and regulations defining under what conditions divorce was or was not permitted. They came to

test Jesus because they were suspicious that he would not abide by the rules.

Jesus refuses to play ball. He is not about spelling out the rules that justify divorce. He points out that Moses permitted divorce under certain circumstances not because he wanted to excuse it but because it was a concession to human sin. Divorce can never be “justified” to God. The existence of divorce is a symptom of a deeper problem.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Hard Hearts

It reveals our “hardness of heart.”

What is “hardness of heart?” A rock is hard. It is impervious to outside influences. Water cannot penetrate it and runs off. So is it with the “hard heart.” The “hard heart” always wants to be right. The “hard heart” insists, “I am right, and you are wrong! And this is why . . .” as the excuses and rationalizations come running off our tongue. The “hard heart” knows it all. The “hard heart” is unwilling and unable to concede any weakness or failure. The “hard heart” only wants to know “Is it lawful?” because the “hard heart” wants to know what it can get away with.

The “hard heart” is the enemy of marriage. When a spouse always has to justify himself; when a spouse can never say, “I am sorry. Forgive me;” when a spouse always has to win; when a spouse insists that her needs are all that matter and can only say “me, myself and I,” then the marriage is crumbling. Then the divorce is not so much the thing that destroys the marriage as the recognition that the marriage has already ended.

The “hard heart” is unwilling to be soft. A “soft heart” is dependent and willing to trust others. The “hard heart” has got to be in charge. The “hard heart” is terrified of being

vulnerable and dependent. The “hard heart” resists ever conceding that it needs to trust anything or anyone other than itself. The “hard heart” is the enemy of love. Like water running off a hard rock, the “hard heart” is impervious to the love and tenderness of another.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Breaking Hard Hearts

But it gets worse. Jesus reminds us Pharisees that our “hardness of heart” and unwillingness to keep our marital promises is like thumbing our noses at God. Marriage is grounded in the very nature of creation. Jesus refers us to the creation of man and woman in the book of Genesis when he says, “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” Our “hardness of heart” puts us at odds not only with each other. It puts us at odds with God. Mess with God and we are messing with trouble, big trouble!

There is no wiggle room here. Divorce can never be what God wants for his people. The more we try to make a case for it, the more we reveal our “hardness of heart.”

The way of the Pharisee is a dead-end street. Our once strong, hard, and proud hearts are cracked open, grieving the loss of what we had once hoped would be, but now is shattered and lost. We feel so tiny, vulnerable, and weak, like a frightened child who feels lost and cannot find her parents.

PROGNOSIS: Good News for Broken Hearts

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): In the Arms of Jesus



The crowds bring to Jesus little children to bless. In that world, little children were not the cute little kids we love to spoil today. In a world riddled with poverty and high rates of mortality, adults wanted those little urchins with their runny noses and smelly diapers to hurry and grow up so that they could make themselves useful. The disciples protest that Jesus should not waste his time on such urchins. But, Jesus blesses them anyway. He takes them up in his arms, puts them in his lap and hugs them, declaring, "It is too such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

That is exactly what Jesus does for us. Jesus loves us in spite of our "hardness of heart." Jesus loves us in spite of the wreckage we have made of our marriages and our families.

He reaches down to take us up in his arms. As he opens his hands to pick us up, we see hands that we did not expect. Scarred by a violent death, these are the hands of one who has been nailed to the cross. These are the hands of one who knows what it is like

to be rejected and despised. He has a soft and vulnerable heart open to people like us. However, unlike us, this soft-hearted One did not run and hide. He trusted God all the way to the cross. His trust was not disappointed. On the third day, God raised him from the dead and announced to the world that because of Jesus, all the soft-hearted trusters of this world will never be hung out to dry.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): New, Soft Hearts

Therefore, when we drag ourselves through the doors on Sunday morning after a week that may have pulverized our hearts and battered our self-esteem, we come because we know that here Jesus says to the soft- and broken-hearted, "Come, my child. Let me take you into my embrace. Let me love you. Let me assure you that I will always have a place for you." We sit with Christ and our soft hearts trust that God loves us even though our lives may be battered and broken.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Soft-Hearted Lives

When we leave Jesus' embrace and walk back into the world, with its broken relationships, we no longer have to be hard. We can let our hearts be soft. We can do things and say words that the hard-hearted would never think of doing or saying: "I'm sorry. I forgive you. I love you. Join me in the company of Jesus."