

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

The deadly trap of – Is it lawful?

Mark 10:2-16

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
analysis by Ed Schroeder

Sabbatarians,

The Gospel appointed in the RCL for next Sunday, Pentecost 20 (October 5), is Mark 10:2-16. Just in case “ochlos” texts from Mark are getting to be a bit much for you—the term’s there again in 10:1—I’ll also try my hand at a Crossings matrix for the Second Lesson: Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12. But first to Mark.

PROLEGOMENA for the text from Mark 10:

1. The “crowds” (10:1) who are the audience here are once more the “ochloi.”
2. The ones diagnosed by Jesus on this dicey issue of divorce are the Pharisees. The clear contrast to them are the children of 13-16 who don’t “do” anything except allow Jesus to “do” to them his embrace, laying on of hands, and finally, blessing.
3. Early on in the text are three diagnostic indices: obsession with the “Is it lawful?” question, testing Jesus, hardness of hearts. Those three items could almost

serve as the three diagnostic stages of our Crossing matrix. See below.

4. The disciples are (again) on the wrong side, and that's true in both parts of the pericope. Re: divorce: After Jesus has "settled" the divorce issue with the Pharisees, "the disciples asked him again about this matter." Whatever the Pharisees were supposed to have heard, the disciples didn't. My own imaging of that episode goes like this: "Ahem. Jesus, what was that all about? Is divorce lawful or isn't it?" The Pharisee heresy is theirs too: wanting to live by the law, and therefore wanting every jot and tittle of that law "perfectly clear."
5. Re: the children: When the disciples shoo the children away from Jesus, they signal that they are still clueless about the "Kingdom of God," about Jesus' role in it, and why kids (ochlos, of course) qualify. The posture for "receiving [important verb] the kingdom of God" reverses the frequent admonition: "Don't just stand there, do something!" Here the counsel is: "Don't (keep on) doing something, but just stand there, and let the Ochlos Messiah do his deed of blessedness on you."
6. Jesus did not make his blessing the kids contingent on their even understanding what he was doing. Their "faith" was simply letting him do it to them. Faith = the posture of receptivity. Au contraire the Pharisees who seek to test him, thus reversing the roles of active subject and receiving subject in their encounter with Jesus. Up till now this is true of the disciples too as Mark portrays them. It doesn't get any better either when later in this chapter Jesus make the third passion prediction.
7. This text is mis-read when seen as "Jesus' teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage." It is well nigh impossible to take that perspective on the text without falling into the legalism trap. Despite the alleged piety

of wanting to get Jesus's own "straight" answer to this "Is it lawful?" question, it mis-reads this Messiah fundamentally. It is another attempt to "test" (rather than to receive) him. Throughout the Gospels Jesus never answers such questions. For to do so would pull legalists even deeper into their entrapment. The ochlos Messiah came not to trap sinners, but to bless them (v.16).

A CROSSINGS MATRIX FOR MARK 10

DIAGNOSIS: The deadly trap of "Is it lawful?"

STAGE 1

Obsessed with the question: Is it lawful? Living life by that fundamental rubric.

STAGE 2

But law is only for the hard-hearted (whatever all that might mean). So the legalists' question exposes the legalists' heart. Doubtless a diagnosis they would protest. Yet when legalists' hearts brings them to "test" Jesus, rather than "receive" him, the case is made for that heart's hardness. Testing Jesus is a test-case for exposing a legalist heart.

STAGE 3

At the deepest level to pursue the "is it lawful?" question is to expose that the questioner—despite his protests—is already breaking the first (sic!) commandment. To the Pharisees Jesus says point blank: sundered marriages contradict God's will "from the beginning." So even to ask for what's permissible on divorce is to be already on the wrong side of the fence from God. In his re-run for the disciples Jesus leads them via the adultery commandment to the same end-point: breaking the adultery injunction is breaking the first commandment. Beset by divorce,

frazzled marriages, sequential adultery, etc. hard-hearted sinners—today as well—need more law like they need a hole in the head. Which is what more and better law finally is. What such sinners need is rescue from the law's constant accusations, call it the blessedness of the Kingdom of God.

PROGNOSIS: Receiving a blessing beyond “what is lawful.”

STAGE 4

No surprise, the Ochlos Messiah brings blessing for those cursed by the law's unending accusation and their curious addiction to that law nonetheless. Jesus is God's Kingdom coming, God's mercy-management of sinners in place of God's otherwise “lawful” counting trespasses and paying sinners what their just deserts are. Christ is God's blessing in place of the law's curse. In his cross and resurrection he sweet-swaps his blessing for our curse.

STAGE 5

Again, no surprise, the only way to receive this mercy-regime from God is to let his Christ do it to us. Call it faith, the posture of receptivity.

STAGE 6

Disciples who've received Christ's “hands-on” blessing replace “Is it lawful?” living with mercy-management as their lifestyle—for themselves, for others. Especially do they do so with the ochlos in their lives, not begrudging them Christ's blessing, but embracing them and bestowing it upon them—hands on!