

Here are a few headlines that might better have been rewritten:

SOMETHING WENT WRONG IN JET CRASH, EXPERT SAYS. Really? Ya' think?

POLICE BEGIN CAMPAIGN TO RUN DOWN JAYWALKERS Doesn't that seem to be taking things a bit far?

PANDA MATING FAILS; VETERINARIAN TAKES OVER. What a guy!

JUVENILE COURT TO TRY SHOOTING DEFENDANT. I guess that works more efficiently than a trial!

Another Sunday Gospel that I would prefer to skip. We already dealt with little children 2 weeks ago, and divorce and remarriage is a minefield certain to explode in my face. Prudence says focus on the children, though, and stay out of trouble. BUT, the elephant remains in the room. It's good for us to realize that divorce -- and remarriage after divorce was a hotly contested topic in Jesus' day. Why else would He comment upon it since He so rarely makes comments about marriage and family?

To correctly understand the text, it's important to put Jesus' comments in context. We need to remember that Jesus is speaking to a thoroughly patriarchal culture. The wives were their husband's property. In Judaism, only the husband could ask for a divorce, not the wife. Because property was often involved, the dissolution of a marriage had all sorts of legal complications. Sound familiar?

The law of Moses already had a position on divorce. The 'test' put to Jesus seems to be a debate about which grounds justify a divorce. The parallel passage in Matthew 19:3 could be compared with this Sunday's gospel since it is more detailed. We find in Deuteronomy 24:1 that a husband who finds something amiss or objectionable in his wife has grounds for divorce. But what is that supposed to mean? Some prominent rabbis considered even a ruined supper as sufficient grounds. "You burned the lamb chops -- you're fired!" Obviously, in such an arrangement, the wife was very vulnerable.

The reality is that Jesus took the vulnerability of women -- and ANYONE -- very seriously. That's the logical inference from when Jesus talks, in verses 13-16, about the vulnerable little children brought to Jesus. Note this section's connection to Mark 9:33-37, that Deacon Tom preached on 2 weeks ago, where the disciples argued about who was the greatest, and Jesus responded by saying that the first is the last and the servant of all. And as if to show by example, Jesus took a child in His arms and spoke of receiving and welcoming the child as the equivalent of welcoming Jesus Himself. (9:37).

Now just 25 verses later, when the disciples scold some parents for bringing their children to Jesus, Jesus becomes angry (10:14). The disciples don't seem to get Jesus' point.

Scholars suggest that Mark is making a connection in his placement of these 2 episodes, welcoming the vulnerable little children and welcoming those who, because of the way they were treated in marriage, are also vulnerable. At a minimum, the passage indicates that we are meant to identify and give special attention to ALL 'little ones' -- think the poor, the immigrant, the outcast, those looked down upon, the illegal alien. They are ALL 'little ones' and as Matthew 25 reminds us, we will be judged on how we have treated them -- because the way we treat them is the way we treat Christ. (adapted from Will Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, October 6, 2024, p. 1-2)

All of which brings us to my second point, the problem. Jesus wants to direct the Pharisees attention to a deeper problem, their relationship to God and others. The Pharisees had staked their lives on the

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importance of knowing the difference between right and wrong. For them the question, “Is it lawful or legal?” is the most important religious question we could ever ask. They saw our relationship to God as dependent upon being able to answer that question correctly. They believed that we couldn’t do what was right if we didn’t know what was legal.

Jesus points out that they are missing the point. The issues surrounding divorce reflect a far deeper problem. Moses permitted divorce under certain circumstances not because it was the right thing to do -- but only as a concession to human sin. The existence of divorce stands as an indictment of the human condition. Divorce reflects the pervasive reality of sin. Divorce reflects our ‘hardness of heart.’

Hardness of heart – we don’t tend to think of sin in this way, certainly not from the confessions that I hear. Usually we make the same mistake that the Pharisees did when it comes to sin. We think that sin is just a matter of do’s and don’t’s. We think of sin as failing to do the right thing or not following the law.

But for Jesus, sin is ‘hardness of heart.’ It is a condition of the heart, a condition that exists even before we do anything wrong, even before we commit sin. A diseased tree produces bad fruit. In order to get good fruit, the condition of the tree needs to be changed. The quality of our heart needs to be changed before sins will no longer be committed. “Hardness of heart’ makes divorce necessary.

What is ‘hardness of heart?’ A rock is hard. It is impervious to outside influences. Water cannot penetrate it. The hard heart is the heart that always wants to be right. The hard heart insists ‘I’m right and you’re wrong.’ The hard heart knows it all. The hard heart is unwilling and unable to concede any weakness or failure on its part. The hard heart wants to know, “Is it lawful or legal?” because the hard heart always wants to be right. The hard heart always wants to win, to succeed, to be on top. And here’s the deepest part - the hard heart lacks compassion -- it does not care about the poor, the immigrant, the alien, those who are rejected because of their sexuality. The hard heart is too busy trying to be perfect and right to truly care. If we find that we have our minds completely made up about an issue – like immigration – and it contradicts the teaching of the church and of Jesus – then we have a hard heart. If we find that we dislike people who are different from us – or who disagree with us – then we are hard of heart. If we are stingy with our money, do not contribute to the church or the poor – we are hard of heart. Remember, the heart of the gospel is conversion – change of heart.

The hard heart has to be willing to become soft; it has to be willing to change. It has to be vulnerable and open to a bigger truth than it currently possesses. But that takes a willingness to trust that truth is bigger than what I know or defend, or that I could actually be mistaken about some things.

So this text is not just about marriage and divorce. This text is not advice about under what conditions divorce is permissible. This text is not a pat on the back for all who have managed to do everything right and are still living in intact marriages. This text is about the condition of our hearts. This text is seeking to expose every one of us – for the hardness in our hearts, hardness that not only has put us at odds with one another but also with God and His ways. I think we might be in trouble! (adapted from Steven E. Albertin, “Hard and Soft Hearts,” in SERMONS.COM, p. 4-5)

Third, the way through. It goes back to Genesis. “What God has united must not be divided.” Remember in our Catholic tradition that marriage is a SACRAMENT, a SIGN. A sign of what? ONENESS. UNITY. That’s the way God created the world. One. But we know that the world is NOT one. It is deeply divided. But it is our job as disciples of Christ to try to help put the world back together. Fr. Richard Rohr says that God’s

major problem in liberating humanity is the undying recurrence of HATRED OF THE OTHER, century after century, in culture after culture and religion after religion.

The dualistic mind, upon which most of us were taught to rely, is simply incapable of the task of creating unity. It automatically divides reality into binary opposites and does almost all its thinking inside this hugely limiting frame. It dares to call this choosing of sides ‘thinking,’ because that is all it knows how to do! ‘Really good’ thinking then becomes devising a strong argument for our side and against another side, race, group, political party, or religion.

There have been enlightened individuals, like the saints, but never established groups – not even churches, synagogues, or mosques, I am sorry to say. The Christian Eucharist was supposed to model and positively teach equality, but we even turned this Sacred Meal into an exclusionary game, a religiously sanctioned declaration and division into groups of the worthy and the unworthy – as if any of us could EVER be worthy? (adapted from Rohr, ONENING, AN ALTERNATIV ORTHODOXY—UNITY AND DIVERSITY, Vol 6, #2, CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION, 2018, p. 13)

I love Pope Francis’ image of the church as a FIELD HOSPITAL, a place where everyone can come for healing, compassion, forgiveness, and help. Wes Seelinger has a similar take on this in his book ONE CHURCH FROM THE FENCE, where he writes: “I have spent long hours in the intensive care waiting room.....watching with anguished people....listening to urgent questions: ‘Will my husband make it? Will my child walk again? How do you live without your companion of 30 years?’ The intensive care waiting room is different from any other place in the world. And the people who wait are different. They can’t do enough for each other. No one is rude. The distinctions of race and class melt away. A person is a father first, a black man second. The garbage man loves his wife as much as the university professor loves his, and everyone understands this. Each person pulls for everyone else. In the intensive care waiting room, the world changes. Vanity and pretense vanish. Laws and legality as well. The universe is focused on the doctor’s next report. If only it will show improvement. Everyone knows that loving someone else is what life is all about.”

Long before we get to the intensive care waiting room may we learn to live like that. In our relationships, in our families, in our church, in our country, in our world. “That all may be one.” Amen.