

Lectionary 27 (B)
October 7, 2018
Text: Mark 10:2-16

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If the only tool you have is a hammer, then everything becomes a nail—and you'll use your hammer to—whack, whack, whack—pound it all into place. And if a person believes that religion is all about commandments and morality, then everything will be law and demand, and maybe judgment and condemnation, or perhaps loopholes for what is permitted. But it certainly won't be grace or compassion or blessing or joy.

In our gospel story for today, it seems that the commandments were the only tool that the religious authorities had, the only way available to them to imagine how to be God's people. And they used the commandments like a hammer to pound everyone into place. So they came to Jesus to ask him about his understanding of what God requires. They wanted to know his opinion about the lawfulness of a man divorcing his wife. And sadly, the Christian church through the generations has all too often taken the same approach, using the commandments to pound people into place. I can't tell you how many people I've known who have been hurt by how the church has spoken of God, who've been wounded by how the church has used Jesus' words—especially concerning sex and marriage. Far too often, the church has been all about using the hammer of judgment and condemnation on anyone who stepped out of line—and of course the line was: being heterosexual, being a virgin until the day you married your one true love, and never getting divorced. But if you were gay, or transgender; if you had sex outside of marriage or got divorced—then “pow,” down came the hammer. And it truly grieves me to see how many people I know who have been told that God's word for them could only be judgment and condemnation.

So I'd like to invite you to notice, right up front, that Jesus doesn't seem to be all that interested in using the commandments like a hammer, like the authorities did. In fact, he really never does answer their question at all, about whether the law makes allowances for divorce. Jesus is a lot more interested in what sort of gift God gives, and what sort of blessing God intends for God's people to receive. God created us with a need for belonging and being in relationship. We have a need to give and receive love, to care and be cared for. And God created us with the ability to experience pleasure and joy and belonging in life together. And

there are so many different ways to receive the blessing that God gives. A heterosexual couple, as husband and wife, can receive great blessing from God in their life together. And a gay couple, as same-gendered partners, can receive great blessing from God in their life together. And there are individuals who are widowed or divorced or single, who may or may not find someone to marry, but who can find joy and belonging in deep friendships and supportive community, giving and receiving love and care that make life rich. If you don't remember anything else from this morning, I hope you'll remember that Jesus' work was never to judge or condemn, but to heal and forgive and to reveal God's love that has no end. And God's love comes to us with gift upon gift—of life and belonging and blessing and joy.

But here's the truly tragic thing about all of the wonderful and beautiful gifts that God gives us—especially these most amazing gifts of relationship and love and sex. The sad truth is there's no good gift given by God that people cannot distort or misuse because of selfishness or self-centeredness—and that's the issue simmering beneath the surface of our gospel story. The reason Jesus responds as he does to the question about divorce is because, in his time, divorce was relatively common, and was open to abuse in a particularly callous way. In the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy 24, there was laid out exactly what a man had to do to divorce his wife—write a certificate of divorce and send her away (which makes you wonder what the religious authorities were really after when they asked Jesus whether divorce was lawful). The law was heavily tilted in favor of men. Only the man could initiate a divorce; and the law only required that his wife “displease him” in some way. In practice, then, men were able to use the law to enter into temporary marriages—taking advantage of women, using them, and then casting them off.

That's why Jesus was uninterested in the question about the lawfulness of divorce. He didn't care what the law permitted when it was being used by men, who held all the power, to take advantage of women—a distressingly contemporary theme. What Jesus was interested in is human flourishing—as individuals and as communities. Because the law regarding divorce was being used to serve male power and dominance, and to treat women as nothing more than objects of male desire, Jesus redirected his listeners' focus, away from what the law permitted and toward the good that God desires. God desires for relationships to be mutual and respectful, for life partners to be fully committed

to each other, for relationships to be a safe place in life to love and be loved, to care and be cared for, so that we can be strong enough to meet the challenges that life brings to us. To focus on what is permitted is to profoundly and tragically miss the point.

Let me say clearly that, if you are in a relationship where there is abuse or violence, Jesus' words are not given to bind you to that place where you are being hurt. And if you have ever heard Jesus' words about divorce and adultery as words of judgment and condemnation that pound like a hammer, I pray you will learn to hear Jesus differently. Jesus' primary concern in his reply to the religious authorities is to highlight the gift God gives in loving, mutual, committed relationships—a gift that is compromised, or even destroyed, when one spouse dominates the other, treating the other as an object instead of a person, or when one spouse is focused only on their own wants and desires rather than on the unity and well-being of their relationship, and the needs of their partner.

Jesus reminds us that what makes life good and rich and beautiful, what brings joy and peace and belonging, isn't getting what we want or what we desire. Love is what makes life good and rich and beautiful—loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Living in relationships where there is love is what makes life meaningful. For those of us who are single or widowed or divorced, God wants us to experience the profound gift of deep and supportive friendships, and healthy, caring community. And for those of us who are in the most intimate of relationships—with our spouse, our life-long partner—God gives us a beautiful and challenging gift that can fill our hearts. It's a gift that will challenge us to get over ourselves and give of ourselves more deeply than we ever imagined. It's a gift with the potential to bring deep joy and belonging and pleasure—but only when we aren't focused just on me-me-me.

Dear children of God, I pray that you will experience the richness and beauty of God's gift—of loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. And I pray that God's gift will fill your life with blessing and joy. Thanks be to God. Amen