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St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
20th Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 22/Year B
October 7, 2018
Text: Mark 10:2-16

“Because of your hardness of heart”

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you (Mark 10:5).”

Like many who will or have preached on today’s Gospel, I struggled all week with what to say this morning. There is so much going on in so many of our personal lives and throughout the world. The awareness of the reality of the brokenness of our humanity has come more front and center than ever before. This is due in part, I suppose, by the use of and speediness of social media and its technology. And unless we’ve said ‘no’ to turning on our television to watch the news or chose to hide our heads in the sand, we are kept in the loop of things happening abroad, in our nation, and closer to home. There are certainly good things happening in the world but day after day we are bombarded with not so good news. Recent events on national and political levels have kept our attention: a confirmation that caused the painful bearing of souls, suspicion, conflicts, and uprisings as abused women and their allies continue to raise their voices as are others who have also experienced abuse. Individuals and terrorists keep us on constant alert for possible threats of violence. Scandals, lies, and crimes that make for good television drama are no longer the things that writers make up but are *real* and continue to be brought into the light.

There is an old adage that says: “there is really nothing new under the sun” as things keep repeating themselves again and again.

Throughout antiquity, in Jesus’ time, throughout the centuries, and up until now, humankind has witnessed some of those same behaviors that have not always been in keeping with God’s intent. We somehow continue to forget that we were created to love God and love our neighbor. When we read the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) or our Catechism (BCP p. 847) we are reminded that, “God required the chosen people to be faithful; to love justice, to do mercy, and to walk humbly with their God.” Yet our hearts and our actions are sometimes quite the

opposite. We have not always seen the other as a beloved child of God. We often treat the other as objects to be cast aside or to be lorded over, controlled, rather than to be held up as precious individuals made in God's image to love and to build up and be in relationship with each other.

So today we find the Pharisees trying to entrap Jesus by using the subject of divorce. They asked him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" The Pharisees already knew the law. Their question was a test. Will he follow or reject the Law of Moses? Their question was not about settling a legal question or getting tips on how to best pastorally help couples deal with a situation such as this. They were not concerned about a woman in an abusive situation. They are not concerned about a young couple who made a mistake in choosing to marry. The spiritual and wellbeing of a couple was the least of their worry. Rather they were bent on getting rid of this rookie rabbi who seemed to be turning the status quo on its head. Remember, it was the topic of divorce that caused Jesus' cousin, John the Baptizer, to lose his head when he criticized Herod Antipas for marrying his brother's wife. Could they trick Jesus into making the same mistake?

But decidedly Jesus was not about to play along with their game. He neither accepts nor rejects the Law of Moses. Rather, he reminds them of the reason *why* the law concerning divorce was written in the first place. It was written because of the hardness of the human heart which can demean, put down, punish, ostracize, destroy, and be the difference between life and death.

In first century Palestine, Jewish marriages were often arranged by families and were meant for life. If love happened, it happened. A woman's voice did not matter. She had no rights. A woman was considered property that could be cast aside. A wife could be dismissed at the whim of her husband for the smallest infraction (a burnt dinner for instance) leaving her to look forward a possible life of poverty and abuse and be forced to resort to any means necessary in order to survive. That is what a hardened heart could impose on another.

Jesus was more concerned about the *condition of the heart and relationships than "legalese"*. The Pharisees wanted to hear what Jesus would say about the laws and procedures. Yet Jesus turns the conversation to speak about relationships, relationships that exemplified what God had intended since the beginning of creation: that humankind was made for God and for each other.

There is certainly a lot that can be said about marriage. There is a lot that can be said about divorce. Both have ideals and procedures which have developed over the centuries and certainly since first century Palestine.

But as always, there are deeper meanings that are meant to be considered whenever Jesus speaks. He isn't just speaking to those individuals who he encountered then but to us in our day. He is speaking to us in our time where *there is really nothing new under the sun*. We, in our humanity, continue to make the same mistakes over and over again. The putting down of others, the abuse of privilege, exploitation, slander, violence, all of it. This is not how we were meant to treat one another. We are to imagine humanity/communities, centered on real relationships, centered on love and respect. Relationships that realize the dignity of another person. Relationships that build, that include and embrace the other.

Hardness of heart is not simply a marital issue. Separation and broken relationships happen no matter what our marital status is. Divorce just doesn't happen in the cases of married couples but anytime division happens between ourselves and God, and ourselves and others. Hardness of heart, hearts of stone, can divide husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings, congregations, rich and poor, Christians and Muslims, black and white, brown and yellow, and all else in between. The hardness of our hearts convinces us that our quest for power, our quest to be better than, is the only way to live in this world. That the chasms that divide us can never be healed. That differences are not capable of being celebrated. That forgiveness is near impossible. That there is no need for anyone except *numero uno*.

But the truth is, *we are people, every one*, who are in some way vulnerable and broken, needy and hurting. We need one another. Theologian David Lose says in his essay for this week that "to be broken is, in fact, to be human. And to be human is to be *loved by God and drawn together into relationship* with all the others God loves. Which means that our gatherings on Sundays are local gatherings of the broken and loved, of those who are hurting but also healing, of those who are lost but have also been found, of those that know their need and seek not simply to have those needs met but have realized that in helping meet the needs of others their own are met in turn."*

The challenge put before us in this context, is not so much about marriage and divorce as it is about our willingness to examine our own hearts; to use these hearts of flesh that we have been endowed with as God intended; to be open to loving and embracing the other as Jesus embraced the little ones who came to him.

Little ones who represent the least, the lost, the broken, and the beloved of God which includes you and me.

Sisters and brothers, we are long past due for a change of heart. Love God. Love your neighbor. And let no one or no thing tear this love asunder. Amen.

“Communities of the Broken and Blessed” essay by David Lose in Dear Partner, posted for September 28, 2015.