

SERMON for Sunday, October 8, 2006
Mark 10:2-16, Genesis 2:18-24

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The Uh-Oh Factor

This is the text, which every preacher wants to avoid, knowing that we each have our own foibles and missteps when it comes to perfect relationships. This is the text, which every one of you wants to avoid hearing for the very same reasons. What exactly is the rule about marriage and divorce? What will Jesus say this time? Will he give us a clear yes or no, right or wrong? Will he once and for all resolve the issue? All of us disciples, no matter how many times we have had this conversation, this pondering about what is the correct way to conduct ourselves and organize our families and societies, want Jesus to give us the definitive answer to life's dilemmas, want a clear road map that will get us out of the tight situations in which we humans find ourselves. Ah, if only it were so easy. If only we could sit Jesus down, or sit down with Jesus, and have it all out, once and for all. But it is not to be. As most of us know, as much of cliché as it is, life is not that simple.

We know indeed that life is not simple. And because of that, we struggle with a number of issues in our day and time that consume our media, our conversations, our worries. Issues of violence both at home and abroad, issues of public policy that become political footballs. And while we might have opinions and we make our decisions based on our life experiences, our like or dislike of certain popular and public personalities, our favorite TV and radio stations, magazines and newspapers, our understanding of the gospel should be the very foundation of who we are and what we do, and yes, even how we vote. Be very clear, I am not proposing that there is a right and wrong way to think about certain political candidates, nor do I intend to cross that fine line and boundary of telling you how to vote, but I am going to explore how our reading of the Scripture shapes what and how, as individuals and as the people of God, we live out God's will for humankind.

When the Pharisees approached Jesus about the grounds for dissolving a marriage contract, they had a plan in mind. That there was divorce in the Old Testament is true. It is mentioned in the Hebrew books of law, in the Torah, which we know as the first five books of the Old Testament. But there was, according to the late Donald Juel, New Testament professor at Luther Seminary, no common interpretation of when and how and why, sharp disagreement in Jewish circles as to when a divorce was permitted. And so the Pharisees cornered Jesus to question him, to have him side with one group or another, hoping to trap him and build their case against him and prove that he was not following the law of God. Jesus refuses to be entangled, and points to the intention of God for all of God's children from the very beginning. God creates us to be in relationship with one another, in mutual companionship and commitment. But when we lose that focus, when we miss the point, when our brokenness thwarts the ideal, we look to laws to get us out of our human messes. Jesus just isn't referring to marriage relationships.

This last week was a difficult one for the community of Weston High School in Cazenovia right here in Wisconsin, as they mourned the shooting death of their principal. And this loss was compounded by the horrific and poignant pictures of the invasion by a gunman, a neighbor, into an Amish schoolhouse and the shootings of five young girls near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. We are appalled at these tragedies, and don't know what to say or think or do. The responses are many: punish the

gunmen, lock the doors, install metal detectors and screen anyone who enters a public building, let everyone be armed and wary and defensive.

In the upcoming election we as citizens will vote on two major issues, as well as make numerous important choices of persons to govern our cities, states, and nation. These issues are, as you well know, the marriage amendment and the death penalty. Once again, these are not simple topics with simple answers. The South Central Synod of Wisconsin of the ELCA, that church body to which we belong, along with other mainline denominational groups, has endorsed the defeat of both proposals. In the case of the marriage amendment, we know that marriage is already defined in the state constitution – it is the second paragraph of the amendment that defines and denies benefits to non-married persons living in one household. And this issue of civil rights is that to which many people of faith object. To reinstate the death penalty does not necessarily make for a safer community, nor does it reduce the huge number of dollars that we spend on building bigger prisons and incarcerating criminals, nor does it begin to address the why of criminal behavior.

In the world's affairs the headlines of destruction do not stop. Just yesterday the headlines were *12 killed, 11 wounded in suicide bombings in Iraq, 2 journalists and a NATO soldier were killed in Afghanistan*, and two weeks ago the death toll of Americans killed in Iraq rose higher than the number of lives lost in the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. So far, it seems, no effective ways have slowed the slaughter, and we appropriate more money to continue.

And, we wonder, how did it get this way?

Back to the gospel for today. After the debate about divorce, Jesus has harsh words about adultery, once again emphasizing that no law can mend a broken relationship and no law can make it right again, no law can erase past experience and send it into oblivion. And then, and then, into a very adult conversation, Jesus brings the little children, those who have no standing in that Biblical society, those who are considered second-class citizens, those who are the losers. It was not the cuteness of children that Jesus was elevating, or that they were adorable. Those are not the qualities that will get you into the kingdom of God, says Jesus. No, the kingdom of God belongs to the vulnerable, to the lost, to the broken, to the helpless and hopeless. And it is only when we are like these children, Jesus says, that we will lay our hearts open to receive the grace of God. Minister Scott Hoezee comments, *In this sense the little children serve as a foil to...the Pharisees and all their sophisticated legal hair-splitting...too hung up on keeping laws, reconnoitering laws, and playing with laws to be hungry enough for the grace alone that saves.*

Uh-oh. People, relationships, open minds and open hearts, grace and God's outstretched hand that will receive us, heal us, and reconcile us to one another. The *uh-oh* factor of the gospel, turning the world upside down, turning our perspective around, showing us a different way, and we are changed. It is that which we bring to the issues and problems of today. The *uh-oh* factor of the gospel is that which removes us from being embroiled in long and convoluted arguments about retribution and punishments, the tit-for-tat kind of legislation that means one human wins and one human loses, and the game is too often a game of life. Remember, God calls all of us, each created human being a child of God, into mutually helpful and beneficial relationships, into a community.

The *uh-oh* factor of the gospel is that which turns our attention away from the formalities of legal contracts to govern marriages and families and towards the ways in which we can support one another in those very same relationships, finding ways to strengthen the bonds of caring.

The *uh-oh* factor of the gospel is that which says that we as the world's people cannot look at one another as objects to be conquered, to be defeated, to control. Jesus pointed the way to the peaceable kingdom by the blessing of children, the most vulnerable of all.

The *uh-oh* factor of the gospel is that which says that troubled teens, troubled men and troubled women will not be helped by condemnation but by grace, the grace of God mediated through God's people.

In 1964, a Roman Catholic man, Jean Vanier, after a career in the navy, a doctorate in philosophy, and a time of college teaching, founded a community in France for developmentally disabled adults, which he called *L'Arche*, or the *Ark*, a symbol of covenant with God. That first small community was the beginning of a world network of one-hundred-thirty-one such communities around the world. He recently discussed about creating relationships with people with disabilities. He said, *The keys to breaking down barriers were listening, evaluating, discerning. It was a gradual formation in myself and a transformation. I had to move from generosity to communion...with generosity you always have power. You have money and opportunity...But communion is about losing power and becoming a friend to someone...and that implies listening and understanding.* And in one of his writings, he wrote, *Love has a transforming power. It is first and foremost a revelation of a person's essential, fundamental beauty and value. If nobody reveals to children their innate beauty and value, they will never know the importance and the meaning of their life. They will hide behind sulking, depression, violence, aggressive... Little by little they become more trusting and want to live more fully. They realise they do not have to defend or prove themselves...*

This gospel today is of broken lives, of hardened hearts. We all recognize in it the world and ourselves. The wonderful *uh-oh* factor of the gospel, or really, the *aha* factor is hope, that our hearts will be opened, that we will be changed, and that we will be healed, that we will care more for one another, and that we will not love the law but love the gospel of Jesus Christ even more. Amen.