

“A CONVERSATION WITH MANY VOICES”

Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Mark 10:2-16

October 8, 2006

The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

Copyright © 2006

I went to a party one night where the host and hostess went off to another room for some private conversation, or at least what they intended to be private conversation. But this was a young couple with a small child. They had one of those baby-minder intercoms, that lets you know if the baby is asleep. Unfortunately, it was on in the room they chose, and on as well in the living room, and all of us guests were treated to the sounds of their argument. It was uncomfortable to listen, and it was several minutes before one of the guests had the presence of mind to turn off the intercom in the room where we were gathered. Minutes later, host and hostess returned. The guests did their best to make light conversation, but that overheard argument was like an elephant in the middle of the room that everyone - most everyone - saw and tried studiously to ignore.

We've all experienced such elephants in the living room in social settings: when there's something there that everybody knows about but no one wants to talk about. Well, in the world of theology as well, we have such elephants. There are texts in the Bible, texts we all know exist, and we studiously ignore them, try to pretend them away; but there they stand, large, unsubtle, creating an air of self-conscious discomfort. In the world of liberal Protestantism, chief among those texts are Jesus' teaching on divorce. The teaching appears in the gospels of both Matthew and Mark; it's a chosen text of the lectionary two out of three years of the three-year cycle. And yet, we liberal church ministers, we rarely choose either to have those passages read in church or to preach about them.

I've never preached about the Bible's teaching on divorce. When I was a young minister, I was afraid of it; then because I was married, I worried that my talking about divorce, never having experienced it, might seem facile or judgmental or both. Then I got divorced, and I was reluctant to broach the topic because it was too close or might be perceived as self-serving. Why I changed my mind this time around, I can't tell you - and I may still live to regret it - but I know that silence can be as profound and as damaging as careless speech. You all deserve to know how our tradition views Jesus' teaching. Also, looking at this one issue might help create a better understanding of what is meant theologically by the word "sin," a word in our religious lexicon that makes many of you uncomfortable; and finally, I'm hoping that a look at this topic will help us better understand the complex dialogue of the Bible. It's an ambitious Sunday!

So let me begin by saying that when the Pharisees come to Jesus and ask him the question of whether divorce is lawful, he gives them a clear and unequivocal answer: no, divorce is not lawful. It is a sin. Always. No exceptions. That's what Jesus says. It's right there in black and white.

But why did he give that answer, and why answer so vehemently? Jesus, over the course of his ministry, had little interest in discussing domestic theology and ethics. For all we have made him the champion of family values, he was just not interested in marriage and family. So to understand why Jesus responded

as he did, we need to understand the question the Pharisees were asking. Context is so important in the Bible.

“Is it lawful,” the Pharisees asked, “for a man to divorce his wife?” The word “lawful” is key here and it is ambiguous. “Is it lawful?” can mean either, is this permitted - the practical question, the law with a small “l”; or, does this reflect Torah, does this action reflect God’s gracious capital-letter “L”—law that leads to wholeness, to right relationship with God and between people. The Pharisees are outlining what the law permits. “This is what Moses allows us to do.” But Jesus, Jesus wants to make the point that we cannot confuse the Law with the law: that just because the law permits divorce, that doesn’t mean divorce is good or theologically negligible, even when all the rules are followed. For Jesus, the larger theological point is that, no matter the rules, divorce is always about sin, about failure, about pain: the married couple has not lived up to the letter or the substance of their marital vows and that’s theologically significant. It matters to God and it matters in our hearts when we say words of solemn promise in God’s name and then break those words. It matters to God, and it matters in our hearts if we fail at the day-to-day actions of loving and cherishing. Whatever is permitted, divorce comes at a cost - to us, to God.

Do you see the distinction here? It’s one thing to say something is a positive good, something to be aspired to, something to be sought: part of the Law with a capital “L.” Marriage, if done well, is such a good. Divorce, even if both partners bend over backwards to try to divorce civilly or even kindly, is never something we hope for in our wholeness. We don’t grow up, saying to ourselves, “I hope I get divorced when I’m an adult.” There may come times and circumstances where divorce is the best option available, but it is never good in itself: it always involves breakage, the rupture of hope and relationship which is the core definition of sin.

So divorce is a sin. But Jesus doesn’t say it’s the worst sin or the only sin. Living in a world where we are rich and others are poor is also a sin. So is coveting our neighbor’s BMW. So is judging other people. So is lying to ourselves or others, not being kind or merciful, not treating the stranger among us well, or worshipping political or military power more than God. Will those of you in this room who are without sin please leave now.

Why do we have such trouble with this word? For me, sin is a really helpful concept. It’s not about simple bad or good; don’t be tempted to reduce it to that, although those elements are certainly there. Sin is as much descriptive as judgmental. Sin describes the contours of the world in which we live, where there’s more than bad and good: there’s whole and broken; there’s failed and succeeded; and insecure and unclear and ambiguous. It’s all mixed up together, and too often it leaves us with the despairing feeling that we couldn’t cleanly do the good even if we could make ourselves want it all the time. Sin is what makes our lives difficult to live. Sin causes us to need a layer in our common life of that which is permissible, but isn’t truly good.

In the gospel lesson today, Jesus is pushing hard for the Pharisees, who see themselves as purer than most, to understand that “permissible” is not the same as “good,” and no matter how well we follow the rules, we are not exempt from sin. He’s baiting them, don’t you see: you think you have high standards,

are above others: I'll show you high standards, so that you see that you can not presume to set yourself apart from the general brokenness of God's people.

Jesus speaks here in the strongest possible language because he's in a theological debate. Contrast this language to Jesus in the healing stories, or Jesus' patience with his disciples and his friends. The biggest mistake we ever make with the Bible is reading the Bible flat, unheeding of nuance and audience. The Pharisees are verbally sparring with Jesus; Jesus is verbally sparring back. Obviously, Jesus will speak in a different tone and with different import here than when he's speaking pastorally, or when he's teaching the crowds, or when he's with his closest friends. That's how all of us speak. That's how all the characters in the Bible speak. This is living prose. It didn't last this long by being dull, boring, one-dimensional. If we are to understand the Bible, especially when we approach texts hard for us to hear, we must be Biblical detectives: Who's speaking? Who is the audience? Are these words metaphor, hyperbole, synecdoche (my favorite word from High school English - I can even spell it)? Are these words of comfort or challenge? You get the point.

Jesus says divorce is a sin. I think most of us would agree with him. Divorce is not a good we aspire to; it is about failure and broken promises: It hurts us; it hurts God. Like all sins, we should take not take it lightly. We should try to avoid it. But that doesn't mean divorce shouldn't be permissible. Precisely because of a complex world of individual and corporate sin, we need layers of permissible, but not intrinsically good actions; but we need to understand them for what they are. And beyond all that, we who would be God's people, Jesus reminded the Pharisees, we need compassion, the fellow feeling that does not judge others their failures in loving that we might not be judged in our own.

Thanks be to God. Amen.