



SAINT JAMES'
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Fremont, California

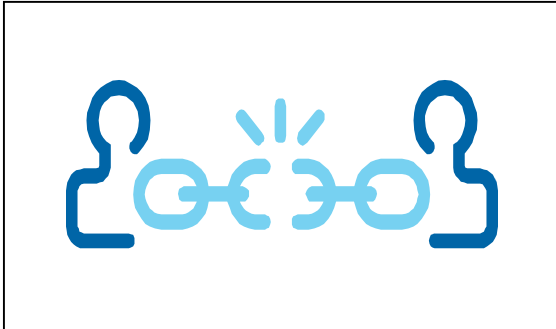
SERMON

4. October, 2009. Pentecost 18

Title: "Uncomfortable Words"

Text: St. Mark 10:2-16

J.J.



The Words of Jesus in today's Gospel are uncomfortable. In our day, we prefer not to talk about such things as divorce and re-marriage, especially in a sermon. I've been preaching for over forty years, and have never talked about it. I suspect when I came to this text, I probably opted to preach about Jesus blessing the little children, and ignored the rest. But not this Sunday . . . and I come to you, not as one who is "holier than thou" when it comes to this issue, but as one who has been through that painful process. And so, this morning, I invite us to "bite the bullet" and look at divorce and those "*Uncomfortable Words*" from Jesus.

The Pharisees, who "came test him" concerning marriage and divorce, were probably as uncomfortable as we are about Jesus' words. They already knew the answer to their question—so they thought—and were hardly prepared for what Jesus had to say about Moses and the certificate of divorce, which, as Jesus points out, was not the intended order of things, but was rather an accommodation on the part of Moses for their "hardness of heart." Nor was Jesus' response any more comfortable for the disciples, for when the disciples inquire further about the topic, Jesus only reinforces what he had said earlier with even tougher words: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery." I suspect the disciples were hoping that Jesus would really clobber the Pharisees, but instead, Jesus throws a curve ball back their way.

And down through the ages, these words of Jesus have made many people uncomfortable, myself included, especially when it comes to a situation in which someone had made a bad decision, or there are issues of incompatibility or abuse, or there are irresolvable differences, or when two people just plainly made a mistake that brings about the end of a relationship . . . these words of Jesus can, and do, make many of us very uncomfortable. In fact, a major division took place in the church (in our church) over these words of Jesus. when Henry VIII separated the English church from the Roman Catholic Church because he could not receive permission to divorce Catherine of Aragon. Indeed, these are "*Uncomfortable Words*" from Jesus, for they make demands that seem unbearable, especially to those who have sought or seek relief from an unhappy situation and irreconcilable differences.

So, how comfortable are you with these words, now that the subject has been introduced in such stark terms as Jesus presents it today? Whether you, yourself, have come from a home in which divorce separated your mother from your father . . . or whether you, yourself, have come to a place in a marriage where divorce was deemed better than staying together . . . or whether you, yourself, have ever passed judgment in your heart on those who were or are divorced . . . if divorce has touched your life in any fashion, how comfortable are you with these words of Jesus? I'm quite sure you're probably not—I'm not. They are tough words, to be sure. More important, what do we make of them? What are we to do with these words from the One whom we call Lord? Are we simply going to brush them aside as the sayings of someone who isn't in touch with reality? Can we possibly take them seriously and still call ourselves his followers if he calls us to a way of life that is beyond our keeping? Now, those are some really tough questions.

But even more difficult is the question would we want to follow Jesus if he asked for anything less? Would we be enchanted by a Jesus who reduced the mandate of God to a "well . . . do the best you can?" Would we respect a Jesus who said: "The Father asks a great deal of you, but in the interests of your obvious weakness, I am willing to receive you if you only will take divorce seriously enough to do it only in extreme circumstances"? Would we be able to call Jesus Lord if he told us that he was repealing, annulling, canceling the original intention of marriage with a new, though still highly restrictive, understanding of what our intentions should be? Sounds a little like Sacramento, or Washington, doesn't it. No, Jesus confronts us with the truth. Whether we like it or not, Jesus speaks the truth.

And this is where we need to look at the Gospel a little more closely. If we didn't notice it before, we need to notice it now, that Jesus, in responding to the Pharisees, Jesus turns this discourse on its ear. The Pharisees, in "testing" Jesus, were asking the question: "What is **allowed** concerning marriage and divorce?" But Jesus' response turns that question upside down: "What is **intended** by marriage or a committed relationship?" . . . and there's a big difference. In doing this, Jesus makes clear that God's intention in marriage or a committed relationship, is to establish a solid base for life in community. The Pharisees are asking about how to protect an individual's happiness . . . how to secure for one's own self the place that seems best to the individuals involved. How can marriage or the commitment serve the two individuals making the promises, giving them the most happiness . . . and if it fails to do that, what allowances are there for getting out of the relationship? What Jesus is telling us, is that marriage or a committed relationship is a "community affair," not just a "family affair" or the affair of two individuals in their own private lives. Through marriage, or a committed relationship, the entire community comes to a better understanding about how two people, with varying interests, concerns, strengths, weaknesses, desires, worries, fears, anxieties, joys, happiness . . . how two individuals can live together, under God, in such a way that the lives of those involved are uplifted and sustained in ways that best serve one another. That's why the "marriage" issue in our day was, and is, so important for Gay and Lesbian couples . . . that's what Proposition 8 was, and is, all about. Marriage is not a human invention. It's a gift from God, serving a variety of purposes, beginning with intimate companionship and extending all the way through to the welfare of the human community. It's not just to promote the happiness of two individuals, but signifies the importance of a life commitment for the whole human family. And, therein lies the problem of divorce, a problem that the Pharisees missed entirely by reducing the question to a purely legal, contractual inquiry: "Is it lawful . . .?"

And what does this Gospel say to us in 2009? What about marriage, and divorce and re-marriage? Well, there are no easy answers. But the Gospel readings over these past few Sundays have been pointing out the way. The Gospel readings are reminding us that Jesus is about to begin his journey to the cross. Twice now, Jesus has told the disciples that "the Son of Humanity must suffer many things and be rejected . . . and be killed, and after three days rise again." And in a week or two, if the Pericope Pickers hadn't cut the reading short, we would hear it again (Mark 10:32-34). What Jesus is telling the disciples, and what Jesus is telling us, is that he, Jesus, is about to "make purification for sins," as today's Second Reading reminds us. In him, and through him, and by him, the sin of the whole world are gathered up, placed upon him and borne by him, so that we sinners, we who miss the mark of God's intention—like in marriage and divorce—so that we sinners might be reconciled to God . . . so that we might be God's people . . . so that we might live as God intended. To divorce ourselves one from another in this, our human family, is disastrous. But Jesus doesn't wag his finger at us. No! He only asks that we learn from each other . . . that we strengthen one another . . . that we give guidance to one another . . . that we comfort one another . . . that we support one other in our journey of life . . . the vision of which always draws us onward and upward to nothing less than the marriage feast of the Lamb. Amen.

S.D.G.

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