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Proper 22

Genesis 2:18-24

Hebrews 2: 9-18

Mark 10: 2-9

There is an old saying that begins: You can fool all of the people some of the time..... With today's readings I wonder if the following variation might be true. You can offend all of the people some of the time. You can offend some of the people all of the time. The readings from the scripture today make me wonder if in fact: maybe you can offend all of the people all of the time. The scripture readings have the potential of offending just about everyone. Indeed, we know in the history of the Church, that these texts have in fact been used to offend and hurt just about everyone.

Those who have experienced or are experiencing the pain of divorce can certainly be offended by the lack of compromise Jesus seems to be offering to the test question offered him by the Pharisees. So, the Gospel has the potential to offend those who have been divorced, children of the divorced, friends of those who are divorced. As this weekend drew closer I was increasingly aware of those in the congregation for whom this text would cause offense and pain.

The Genesis reading widens our potential circle of offense. Those who are single can certainly be offended by this text. Many have used the text to treat those who never marry as less than whole, less than complete. There is often in the church and in the world a bias against, a suspicion of those who are single, those who have never married. (How convenient to ignore the fact that Jesus, the one we see as being the most fully human person who ever lived was most likely single.)

The readings can potentially offend those husbands and wives who live their marriage as a true covenant between equal partners. Those who refuse to see the woman's place as secondary to the man's.....but who recognize that "helper" is in fact a divine characteristic, and who recognize the gift of equal human relationships as a gift from God to take away human loneliness.

The reading from Genesis has been misused to viciously attack persons who are gay or lesbian. As if, the authors of Genesis were able to explain the profound mystery of human sexuality in a couple chapters of ancient texts.

The reading can offend all those who in the midst of marriages that are emotionally or physically abusive. These readings have been and still are used too often to demand husbands and wives remain in abusive relationships. Yes indeed, these readings do have the potential to offend all of the people all the time. Given that potential, and indeed recognizing the truth that these texts have caused such tremendous pain to so many people over the years. What can we say in readings that can help limit the offense, and indeed help heal some of the wounds that these texts have caused?

Genesis recognizes a fact of our humanness. God recognized from the beginning that it is not good for the human to be alone. To be fully human is to be in relationship. A relationship with one who is other than one self. To alleviate this aloneness, God gave the human a great gift. God gave the human a partner. This partnership was first found in the relationship of the Man and Woman. But, out of that first partnership others have grown. We see in history this partnership lived out in the gift God has given in the loving relationship of parent and child. We see it lived in the deep love of brother and sister. We see it lived in deep friendships. Deep friendships between those of the same gender, those of opposite gender. We see this gift lived in relationships

that heterosexual and homosexual. We see this gift lived in relationships that are celebrated in sexual intercourse and those that are lived in relationships that are not. I believe that what is most holy, that what is most clearly spoken of in Genesis is our creator's desire that the human not be alone. That was God's desire then, and that I believe is God's desire now.

From the great gift of Genesis then, we move to Mark's gospel. Mark's gospel begins today, not with an appreciation of the gift of human relationships, but, as a test about divorce. Divorce is an issue in the Jewish community in Jesus time. There are differing religious opinions about when it should be allowed. They come to Jesus then, to test him. "Lets see if we can trip Jesus up....lets see if we can lure him into the trap of the debate about divorce. Maybe we can make him offend some of the people, maybe we can make him offend all of the people."

Jesus does not fall into the trap. Jesus avoids the question of divorce by speaking instead about what marriage was intended in for the beginning. Jesus speaks about the gift of the relationship that God gave to humankind. Divorce is not what God intended. It has come about only because of hardness of heart. I believe that in the Gospel this weekend, Jesus is pointing to a truth that I believe is as valid today as it was in his day, as it was in the day of Moses, as it has been through all human history: God blesses us with gifts, gifts that we need to live fully human lives, and through the hardness of our hearts we use those gifts in a way that God never intended, we use those gifts in a way that demeans our humanity. God has given us the gift of each other, the gift of relationships, the gift of our sexuality and we use those gifts to test, judge, condemn, and persecute those who do not receive that gift in the same way we do. What we have done with the gift of our relationship, we have done with every other gift as well. We are given the gift of our voice, of speech and we use it to spread lies and hate. We have been given the gift of technology and we use it to destroy creation rather than serve it. We have been given the gift of freedom, and we use it for selfishness. We have been given the gift of faith, and we use it to build walls of division. We have been given the gift of life itself and we use it in ways that bring death to others. We are capable of taking every single gift that God gives us and turning them into something evil. That my friends is the sinful state of the world. That my friends is the result of our hardness of heart.

Thinking of our physical bodies may help us to understand "hardness of heart". Heart disease is the leading cause of death. Think of all the things that damage our human hearts: Stress, diet, smoking, lack of activity. Our human heart gets hard. The blood no longer passes through the heart. The heart gets hard, we die. Our spiritual heart, the heart where the life of God flows can grow hard as well. What hardens our spiritual heart? Sin. Of course, whenever we choose that which is evil, that which is less than our best, that which destroys, that which hurts our hearts grow hard. But might not other factors cause this hardness as well? Might not fear cause such hardness. Fear of failure, fear of something in our past, fear caused by trauma. Fear can harden hearts. Grief, disappointment. A hurt done to us. A hurt we brought upon ourself. Shame can harden our hearts. Resentment. Anger. All of these can harden our hearts. All of these can cause us to misuse and abuse the gifts that God has given us.

The reading from the letter to the Hebrews presents Jesus as the one who can soften our hardened hearts. In Jesus, we see our God who shared the flesh and blood of our humanity. In Jesus we see a God who shared the pain of our humanity. In Jesus we see a God who even shared our death. In Jesus we see a God whose heart was pierced on the cross for us. Jesus was restored to life, his heart was brought back to life by the power of God's love.

This gift of love that we are given as well.

This gift of love has the power to soften our hearts.

This gift of love has the power to bring us back to life again.

This gift of love has the power to enable us to receive and cherish once again the gifts of each other, the gifts of our beloved, all the gifts that God desires to give us.

There is an old saying that begins: You can fool some of the people some of the time.

Today we celebrate that in Jesus we see a loving God who can:

Bless all of the people all of the time.

Forgive all of the people all of the time.

Give life to all of the people all of the time.