

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

October 4, 2009

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Worship Theme: The Tough and Tender Jesus

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2: 5-12, Mark 10: 2-16

I wish I had time today to say more about the subjects of divorce and marriage raised in the Gospel lesson. I hope what is said will stimulate thought, conversation, Bible study and prayer so that you might fill in the places left blank for yourselves.

Before we begin to briefly explore what Jesus said about divorce and marriage in Mark's Gospel, it is helpful for us to be clear about who Jesus is and why he could speak about God as he did.

We begin with the passage from Hebrews. Hebrews most likely was a series of sermons presented to new Christians recently converted from Judaism. It was written to encourage them to stay faithful to God in Jesus Christ in the midst of the persecution they were suffering for their faith. Those early Christians were being pressured into believing that we are saved by the law, not by faith in God in Jesus Christ. However, the writer wanted the people then, and any of us who read these scriptures to be very clear about who Jesus is. The writer declares that God at one time had spoken to the people of the Old Testament through the prophets, but now he speaks to us in Jesus, his Son, through whom he created the world. Jesus is, as Hebrews poetically explains, "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being." If we want to see God, we only need look upon Jesus and obey him as we read about him in the scriptures. In seminary, we were taught that the best way to interpret what God wants us to be and do from the Bible is to interpret the scripture through Jesus as "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being."

Hebrews also teaches us that Jesus carries the authority of God. "He sustains all things by his powerful word." In those days, there were people who worshipped angels. They challenged the idea that Jesus was the Son of God and had the authority from God to watch over us, save us and guide us. They insisted angels were the ones to do that. Not so, says the writer, for Jesus was the pioneer, the path maker of our faith to God. He is the one who came from heaven to suffer death for our sins. He is the only one who can make us holy before God and save us. Angels cannot do any of this. By his suffering, Jesus proved the authority he has is from God to watch over us, save us and guide us. He is the one who continues to sustain all things by his powerful word.

All this background sets us up for the Gospel lesson where the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day challenged Jesus' connections to God and his ability to sustain and guide his disciples with his teachings. They tried to trap and discredit Jesus with a question on divorce. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

Here are some of the traps in the question. "There were two schools of thought in Jesus' day concerning divorce, one liberal and one conservative. Rabbi Shammai taught that divorce was only permissible on the grounds of some sexual impropriety. His was the stricter view. Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, had a more liberal view and taught that a man could divorce his wife for any reason. If she burned his breakfast, put too much salt on his food, showed disrespect to him, spoke disrespectfully of her

husband's parents in his presence, spoke to a man on the street, or even let her hair down in public, he could divorce her” simply by saying I divorce you three times in a row. A woman had no right to divorce her husband for any reason in those days. “The view of Rabbi Hillel was the view that was popular in Jesus’ day. So divorce was common in Palestine, and in this respect the setting was not unlike our own.” Any answer by Jesus would place him on one side or the other of the controversy between the two rabbinic schools. It would give the Pharisees more ammunition with which to try to discredit him. Mickey Anders, [Making Marriage Work](#)

If Jesus answered, “Yes,” he could have been seen as condoning the behavior of some Pharisees who would divorce their wives to go marry a prostitute to have sex with her and then divorce her for the next woman and so on so it would look like the Pharisees had not sinned. This was still adultery in spirit, and may be why Jesus raised adultery as a major issue in divorces. Also, in this passage, Jesus lifted up the importance of children to him and God. As you may recall, children were not considered important at all in that society. Tragically at that time, a divorce usually resulted in women and children being sent out on the street to fend for themselves. Sadly today, divorce is a major cause of poverty, especially among children.

The truth is no matter what answer Jesus gave, women at that time would still be blamed for the husband divorcing them. Jesus was not, and is not interested in placing blame or laying guilt trips on people who have gone through or are going through the terrible experience of a divorce. He is the God who walks with anyone who goes through a divorce. The Pharisees set many traps and challenges to the one who is “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being,” and who speaks with authority the Word of God to guide us.

Jesus, being the reflection and exact imprint of God, was both tough enough and tender enough to turn the question “Is divorce lawful?” on its head. “He pushed beyond the question and the law to the saving grace of God in the creation story in Genesis 1-2. What emerged is the affirmation of marriage as the lifelong joining of two persons in a profound union (‘one flesh’). Even fathers and mothers are to be left in the pursuit of this new relationship. Before debating the possible grounds for divorce, the Pharisees needed to understand that marriage is a gift of God’s good creation. Rather than resorting to a sweeping legal prohibition to exclude any and all divorce, Jesus recalled God’s original intent for marriage,” and then included his deep love of and concern for children who often suffered the most in a divorce. For Jesus, who spoke for God in both tough and tender tones, marriage and divorce were extremely serious subjects with both positive and negative consequences for humanity. In the beginning, Jesus worked with God to tenderly create marriage. He died the toughest of deaths so we could be forgiven when we have failed in our responsibilities to carry out what God and he intended. When the trap was set, Jesus pushed beyond the question and the law to the saving grace of God active in our lives since the creation of the world. He indeed turned the question on its head. [Texts For Preaching—Year B pgs. 538-39](#)

I would like to join Jesus in affirming God’s saving grace and intentions for marriage from the first day of creation by sharing with you the STATEMENT ON THE GIFT OF MARRIAGE from our [Book of Common Worship](#). This a statement based on

a variety of passages from the Bible. It reflects both the toughness and tenderness of Jesus, and his ability to sustain us by his powerful word.

“We gather in the presence of God to give thanks for the gift of marriage, to witness the joining together of (the two people to be married) to surround them with our prayers, and to ask God’s blessing upon them, so that they may be strengthened for their life together and nurtured in their love for God. God created us male and female, and gave us marriage so that husband and wife may help and comfort each other, living faithfully together in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, throughout all their days. God gave us marriage for the full expression of the love between a man and a woman. In marriage a woman and a man belong to each other, and with affection and tenderness freely give themselves to each other. God gave us marriage for the well-being of human society, for the ordering of family life, and for the birth and nurture of children. God gave us marriage as a holy mystery in which a man and a woman are joined together, and become one, just as Christ is one with the church. In marriage, husband and wife are called to a new way of life, created, ordered, and blessed by God. This way of life must not be entered into carelessly, or from selfish motives, but responsibly, and prayerfully. We rejoice that marriage is given by God, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, let marriage be held in honor by all.” [The Book of Common Worship](#), pg. 842 / Christian Marriage: Rite I

Those of us who are married, or have been married know we need Jesus, “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and who sustains all things by his powerful word” to make any marriage work. We need his toughness and tenderness as do the children, youth and adults who have suffered through divorce. We all need to receive the kingdom of God as a little child, in humility and complete trust. We all need him to take us in his arms, lay his hands on us and bless us. In his tenderness, he now invites all of us to come eat with him at the table; to remember how tough he was in shedding his blood and giving his body on the cross to forgive us of our sins; and to pour out upon us the saving grace of God. Thus, he continues to sustain and guide us by his powerful word.