

-Christina Smerick

Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

This lectionary is a tough sell. In fact, every commentary I read mentions the fact that no one, really, likes to preach on some of these passages, which made me feel slightly less alone as I wrestled this week. Most pastors, however, have trouble mostly with Mark, whereas I, because I'm a difficult person I guess, struggle with all of it. All of the passages today make me squirm.

Job and the Psalmist make me feel bad about myself, and for a bit, Jesus doesn't help. In both Job and the Psalms, we have examples of upright people who walk straight and do not sin, even with their lips. And whether you've personally lived through a divorce or not, it is difficult to hear this passage in Mark, in which Jesus, rather than pushing back against the legalism of the Pharisees, instead seems to double-down on the restrictions of divorce. This stuff, coupled with the extravagant Christology of Hebrews, can leave one, and by one here I mean me, rather grumpy at Scripture. But that is why the lectionary is such a good thing, because it forces us to face the passages of Scripture that make us uncomfortable; it refuses to let us hide from Scripture by simply turning to our tried-and-true passages that give us comfort and don't ask us to think too much. So let's dive in.

Here is the mighty example of Job, the righteous man, the man who knows he has not sinned and therefore has not brought these horrible situations upon himself through some divine retribution. God himself admits that there is 'no reason' for Job to suffer so (which is a pithy response to the 'everything happens for a reason' platitude that can rightfully enrage a suffering person). The Psalmist seems cut from the same cloth—one who has 'walked in my integrity and ...trusted in the Lord without wavering'. These are not words I can easily say out loud without feeling like a liar. I, and maybe you are too, am all about wavering. I have often walked well outside my integrity; in fact, there have been times when my integrity has slipped the leash and run off altogether. Even the Psalmist's call for God to 'test him,' seems, after reading Job and reflecting upon my own lack of righteousness, to be asking for trouble. Yet these are our Old Testament passages this morning: righteous men before God.

So we pass from the example of a righteous man suffering calamities, to a righteous man proclaiming his innocence, to the passage in Mark, which directly follows other harsh lessons from Jesus, which we explored last week. One way to think of last week's passage is in conjunction with the old splinter/plank analogy—that it is all well and good to be looking at others, judging them by what they're doing in Jesus' name, deciding that they're not part of the club, but perhaps we are instead to be focused upon what we're failing to do, what flaws we have in ministry and sacrifice, how we are failing within the community rather than what others are doing 'outside'. And perhaps one of our failures is the very inside/outside construction. This

is followed by another confrontation with the Pharisees amongst a crowd—another situation of ‘inside/outside’ in which the Pharisees, themselves not of one mind regarding divorce, seek to alienate half the crowd and trap Jesus by getting him to pick sides regarding divorce. Will he go the strict way of Shammai, or the more lenient way of Hillel? Either way, of course, Jesus loses as he would give them a platform from which to tear him down. And as usual, Jesus initially ignores the dilemma and instead goes to the real heart of the question: not, what is divorce, but what is marriage? Rather than focusing upon the pragmatics of divorce proceedings, he shifts the focus to the *intended* relationships we’re to have, as God initially instituted them. Before there was the Law, before there was the Fall, there was the beginning, and it was good. And part of this beginning was a union, a union of two becoming one, a union of disparate people somehow working in interdependence and mutual support. Regardless as to how one approaches the divorce question, then, it is paramount that everyone understand what marriage was *intended* to look like. What is notable in this situation is that, in front of the crowd and with the Pharisees, Jesus does not address divorce at all. He seemingly avoids the topic and redirects the question. It is only in the privacy of a house, with just his disciples, that he expands on what divorce is, and brings up the matter of adultery via remarriage.

I don’t think any pastor looks forward to getting these passages to preach about, and I can tell you that I didn’t like it one bit. There is so much pain and hurt surrounding divorce and these passages can feel like salt in the wound. Having watched my own parents divorce, I know that not many traipse into divorce lightly; that no one emerges unscathed; that trust is broken, worlds are shaken, and feelings of failure and guilt accompany the occasional feelings of relief and release. Jesus’ words here can hurt. They can feel accusatory. The savior who died for us can take on a cast that feels more like the terrifying God of Judgment than the lamb who was slain. And it is hard to reconcile this with the Christ of Hebrews, who ‘tasted death for everyone’. But that is precisely what we must do, to move through these passages without succumbing to the temptation, and I think it is a temptation, to make them nothing but condemnation, and therefore consign them to something ‘cultural’ or ‘for his time’ and not relevant. Irrelevant is easier. But that’s not where we should stop.

So. How do we avoid whitewashing Jesus’ words, while at the same time hearing redemption in them? What is Jesus truly defending here? Perhaps moving to the next section of the Gospel reading, then back again, might help us out. Weirdly juxtaposed with accusations of adultery is the passage about the faith of little children. First of all, the disciples were trying to keep the kids away from Jesus, and Jesus becomes ‘indignant’. Why keep the kids away? It seems as though the disciples, and this was fairly typical of the culture of the time, did not think all children were precious little gifts from God, immortalized in Precious Moments statues, but instead that they were ‘less than’ and not as important as the pressing theological concerns of the day. Children have no rights in ancient Judea. They are not ‘official’. Perhaps this even resonates a bit with last week’s passage, with those who do miracles in Jesus’ name but aren’t part of the ‘group’. In either case, the disciples are trying to hold the line here and keep the rabble out. Only those official persons can access the Christ. And this is the Jesus we feel comforted by, because he rebukes them and corrects them, stating that “whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as

a little child will never enter it.” Now I refuse to read this passage as some statement about the fundamental innocence of children, because I have a child, and so I know that’s just not true. J Innocent, ha! This isn’t about being naïve, or being unsullied. This is about being *powerless*. As Walter Brueggeman notes, “children have no excuses to give, no dowries to offer, no bargaining chips...” And being like children when approaching God means recognizing that “our history of failure does not disqualify us,” that there is nothing we need bring to the table in order to receive salvation. In the passage on marriage, Jesus reminds us not only of what a marriage should be, but of what relationships should be: interdependent, whole, devoted, united. Yet we know what this world can do, what we can do, and we know, and God knows, that brokenness arrives, that hurt builds, that the center does not hold, that things fragment. Even when, like Job, it’s not our fault; and often when it is. In either case, however, in EVERY case, Jesus receives. Does he want us to take our relationships seriously, to recognize the holy vision God has of human interaction? Yes, and we forget that and treat our relationships lightly at our peril. But that is not the final word, because Jesus is the first and last Word, he who was made for a little while lower than the angels, but now crowned with glory and honor *because of the suffering of death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone*. Diane Bergant writes, “The final example of bonding is that...Jesus became one of us, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. As one of us, he ‘tasted death for everyone.’ He was not only the sacrifice, but also the high priest. Thus the writer could say: ‘He who consecrates and those who are being consecrated all have one origin.’ We are now his brothers and sisters, bonded with him, and through him bonded with God. We are really not alone.” Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters, even as we approach him not in innocent righteousness but in pain and sin. That’s the beauty of Hebrews, and the harsh beauty of Mark, and the overwhelming reminder at the end of Job—that praise be, God is before and through all things, that it is not up to us to show up with the right stuff, but that in brokenness, in exclusion, without status and without anything to give, Jesus takes us up in his arms, lays his hands on us, and blesses us. Thanks be to God.