

20th Sunday after Pentecost – Jesus Contradicts the Bible
Mark 10:2-16, Genesis 2:18-24

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Grace to you and peace from God our creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word on the street is that the ELCA is a liberal church that no longer believes in the Bible. We started down this slippery slope back when our predecessor Lutheran bodies began to ordain women in the 1970s, which contradicts clear rules in the Bible about women being silent in church, they will say. But we signaled that we were in full free-fall when in 2009 we allowed room in our denomination for the ordination of men and women in committed same-sex relationships. Because, don't you know, there are six or seven passages in the Bible that clearly condemn same-sex intimacy, they tell us. The conclusion is clear. We are no longer a Bible-believing church. I get a little tired of hearing this criticism, and maybe you do too. It is presumptuous and arrogant. It tells us that if we don't understand and use the Bible the way conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists do, then we must not believe the Bible or care about what it says. And I think it puts us on the defensive, because we don't always know what to do with those passages that are quoted against us. So I think it is a good idea every once in a while to face these criticisms head on and make a case for how we understand and use the Bible. Because I think the Lutheran approach, combined with modern critical scholarship, actually allows the Word of God to do its saving work on us in a much more effective and faithful way than other approaches. I would never say that others don't believe the Bible because they don't agree with me. But I might suggest that they could be missing the Bible's real intent.

One of the ways we take the Bible seriously is by using the lectionary. That's cycle of readings that determine which scriptures are before us each Sunday. It ensures that over a three-year period we read most of the New Testament and a significant portion of the Old Testament. It helps us to get a sense of the whole of the biblical witness, and not just the parts that we like, the ones that reinforce the opinions we have already developed. Today's Gospel reading is a case in point. This wouldn't be my first choice of texts to preach on. It wouldn't even make my top one hundred. Pastors complain about this every time it comes around. But here it is. And we already had a dry run at it at On The Way this past Thursday, where I will note that people who had been divorced outnumbered those who hadn't. So let's see if we can't squeeze some good news from this reading.

First, let's just say what a conventional reading of this text seems to be telling us, especially if we're inclined to use the Bible as a rule book. We don't even have to worry about that initial exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees. We can jump straight to Jesus' private meeting with his disciples afterwards. "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Bam! Jesus mic drop. Case closed. End of story. And what do we do with that? We conclude that you should never get a divorce, and if you do you're a sinner. And if you don't, you get to feel superior to those who have. You get to congratulate yourself for not being a sinner, or at least not as bad a sinner as those divorced people. It's like that joke about surviving a bear attack. You don't have to be faster than the bear, you just have to be faster than the other people you're with. As though there were degrees of sinners, and as long as you're not as bad as others you're OK.

Alright, now let's back up and give this thing some context. First, the fact that the Pharisees come to Jesus and try to test him is not insignificant here. They're trying to trip him up. It reminds me of the partisan sniping that has been going back and forth across the aisle in Congress in recent weeks. Questions are not asked so much for the answers as they are to trip somebody up, or to make one party look good at the expense of the other. The Pharisees are using

this age old tactic. John the Baptist has already been killed by this point in Mark, and John died because of his interference in Herod's illegal marriage. So maybe if Jesus's opinions on marriage match John's, then Herod will get rid of him too.

But the other thing that's going on here is an attempt to justify a practice that benefitted men at the expense of women. It was men who were allowed to divorce their wives, not the other way around. And wives, who left their homes to join their husbands families, were particularly vulnerable. A husband's first loyalty was not to his wife, but to his mother. So if a man's mother didn't like her son's wife, the wife couldn't expect her husband to defend her. And let's remember that women were totally dependent on men in this culture. A woman who was divorced was sent back to her parents, if they were still alive. And life expectancies were much shorter in those days. Most people didn't live past 40. So if she didn't have parents, or a brother, she was without any support. That's why widows were such a focus of the early church's concern.

This is the context for the Pharisee's question about what's lawful. They want Jesus' opinion on what's allowed, what they can do and not feel bad about. And how does Jesus answer? He contradicts Moses. He goes against the Bible! These Pharisees came to him knowing what the rule was. It was in the Bible. (They were testing him, remember?) And Jesus has the gall to tell them that something in the Bible is against God's intentions! And then he quotes scripture against scripture, as if scripture could contradict itself. Which of course it can. Moses may have allowed divorce, Jesus says, but that's not what God wanted. The two become one flesh, so tearing them apart is going to do damage. And that damage in this culture is not going to be borne equally. So Jesus can be seen to be showing God's concern for the vulnerable here. People are not things. They should not be used and discarded. They bear the image of God.

But then Jesus *does* go on to speak to the disciples behind closed doors. Divorcing and remarrying is adultery, he tells them. It's sinful. That can be hard to hear. Especially for those who have endured the pain of divorce. It's rubbing salt into a wound. But do you know what else is sinful? Do you know what else Jesus says is adultery? Looking at a woman with desire. And I'm going to go out on a limb and assume that that applies to looking at a man with desire too. Does Jesus say that that's a lesser sin that you don't have to worry about? He does not. He also says that being angry with a brother or sister will be judged like murder. Still think you can avoid sin? Or minimize your on sin by playing the "what about" game and pointing the finger at other? Still looking for a way that the law doesn't apply to you? It's a fools errand.

Because here's the thing. Jesus came to save sinners, not the self-righteous. If you imagine that you can be righteous on your own, by your good behavior, or by avoiding what you consider to be the "really bad" sins, *then you don't need Jesus*.

Those who approach the Bible simplistically and legalistically miss that Jesus did not come to be a new and better Moses, with new and better laws for us to obey in order to get right with God. Jesus came because "we are in captivity to sin and cannot free ourselves." He wants us to see that none of us can live up to the law. We can't even come close. Only God can free us from captivity to sin by forgiving our sin and taking the consequences of our sinfulness and brokenness upon himself. He dies our death in order to destroy the power of sin, death, and evil in the world. And then he rises to new, abundant and everlasting life, and in Holy Baptism he brings us along for the ride through death to life. We are freed from our past in order to live into God's future. It is for this good news that we read the Bible, because it is this good news that makes all the difference, for us and for the whole world. So let's keep mining the Bible for the gospel, and let the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.