

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 4, 2009
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The recent issue taken up at the National assembly of our church regarding the ordination and service of pastors who are gay or lesbian has had much print and conversation devoted to it, both before the vote and subsequently thereafter. It remains a hot button issue. There are congregations having discussions about whether or not they will remain in the ELCA as a result of the decision the national took this past summer. I suspect there are some among you who have strong opinions one way or the other, and while I would appreciate being given the opportunity to talk with you personally about it, this sermon is not about that issue, but it is related in many ways to it.

I'm old enough to remember similar conversations about the eligibility of service from 40 years ago that centered on the issue of divorce. Could a man, it was only men back then, whose marriage ended in divorce, continue to serve in the ordained ministry? When I was in seminary, back in the Middle Ages, the issue was could a person who was divorced, even seek ordination. My best friend in seminary, Eric Reinhard, was previously divorced and remained unmarried throughout his seminary career, but when it came time for the senior class to be reviewed for eligibility, Eric was "put through his paces" on that issue, so much so, that he questioned the church's true motivation with regards to this issue in his life. Divorce was not new in the mid 70's. As a matter of fact, if you trace its roots in Hebrew Scripture at least as far back as Moses, you're talking at least 5 millennia.

You'd have thought that the church, which was only 2 millennia old, would have come up with a policy by 1970. I just heard this past week, that one of my colleagues here in Western New York, has announced he's leaving his parish because he and his wife are getting divorced. I don't know the circumstances surrounding the situation, but whatever they may be, suffice it to say, the issue of divorce and the pastoral ministry is still alive and well.

Regarding divorce, the church is quite clear. From the section of its constitution that deals with the role and expectation of clergy, it reads, "*out of deep concern for effective extension of the gospel, this church remains alert to the high calling of discipleship in Jesus Christ. The ordained ministers of this church, as persons*

charged with special responsibility for the proclamation of the gospel, are to seek to reflect the new life in Christ, avoiding that which would make them stumbling blocks to others. To that end, this church recognizes that there is behavior that is deemed to be incompatible with ordained ministry, and that calls for disciplinary action. This church is committed to the sanctity of marriage and the enhancement of family life. Ordained ministers of this church, whether married or single, are expected to uphold Christian ideals of marriage in their public ministry as well as in private life. Spouse and children, if any, are to be regarded with love, respect and commitment. Any departure from this normative behavior may be considered conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.”

So it is now, so it was then, divorce was controversial and anyone who wished to debate it knew that the ground around the issue was a slippery slope. In today’s gospel, we read about those tricky Pharisees, trying, as always to get Jesus to put his foot in his mouth. They bring up the topic of divorce, knowing that no matter how he answers the questions asked about it, he’s going to risk offending someone. Divorce is also a tinder box and quicksand issue. Say you’re agin’ it and you contradict the law of Moses where it says a man can divorce his wife. Say you’re for it, and the evidence of Scripture, in particular the passage you just heard read this morning, will come up and bite you.

So, instead of saying, “Yea,” or “Nay,” he talks instead about the sanctity of marriage and how God is invested in every relationship. He goes on to say that in the world of perfect relationships, divorce would be non-existent, relationships would never end, never deteriorate, never be broken apart by any circumstance. In a perfect world, there would never be any selfishness, any temptation, any abuse, any unfaithfulness. He goes on to say that the whole business of divorce came about, in the first place, because “of your hardness of heart.” Better read, because of sin, better read, because of life as we know it.

I performed a marriage ceremony here yesterday. It was a beautiful day, the groom was handsome and nervous, the bride glowing and beautiful. As they stood before me and recited their vows, I know for a fact that there was no doubt in their minds that this was the right if not ht best thing they could ever do in their lives, and the fact that their marriage could come under assault and experience rocky times was the furthest thing from their minds.

Just so, no one enters into marriage looking for divorce, at least in my 500 plus weddings I’ve never seen it. But the reality of our lives is that sometimes it does happen. No one wants it, but sometimes it comes. Oftentimes it’s self inflicted,

but sometimes it's circumstantial, and those are the hardest ones to call. To quote a saying I have used often, when relationships disintegrate, if I could speak for God, and that's a dangerous thing to do, it's not what God wants. If God could have God's way, every relationship would be healthy and whole, no circumstance would ever drive couples apart, no serious illness, no tragedy, no other person, no misspoken or hurtful word.

If sin, by definition, is that which separates us from God, then any sinful act on our part separates us from having things the way God would have them.

Does that mean that God is angry? When a couple's love is gone and their happiness or at least their hope for happiness goes with it, does it mean that we've ticked God off too?

Again, if I could speak for God, I don't think God is angry as much as God is sad. Because I think more than a perfect world, God wants a joyful one. I think more than anything else, what God wants for God's children is that they be happy and fulfilled and productive and healthy. That doesn't mean instead of working to keep a relationship going, or working to heal a broken heart, you run after every ice cream truck that comes down the street. What it does mean is that given the reality of the world in which we live, a world that has sin in it and hardship and pain and faithlessness and temptation, you do the best with what you have and look for happiness on the other side.

I think that's why after he spoke of divorce and adultery and hardness of heart he added the illustration about children. Children have the remarkable ability to look for a rainbow at the end of a storm, to find joy in an empty box and to rely on love their whole lives. In a tinderbox they relish the warmth, in quicksand, they build a castle.

To such belongs the kingdom of God.

Jesus said the law was clear, and the law exists because of sin. If there were no transgression there would be no need for the law. Law points to the reality of sin. What then, how then, do we live within this reality? That's when he lifted up the child. The child lives by a different law, the child lives by the law of love, and Jesus was quick to point out, so does God.

Amen.