

First Congregational Church of Royal Oak
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 03, 2021
World Communion Sunday

First Reading: N/A
Gospel: Mark 10:2-16

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Jesus (Matthew 25:40)

Hardened Hearts

I want to rewind our reading of Mark’s Gospel all the way back to 2:23 – 3:6. Jesus and the Pharisees get into a debate about the Sabbath. It seems that he and his disciples were seen picking the heads of wheat from a field and the Pharisees demanded to know why the disciples were working on the Sabbath.

Then Jesus pushes the envelope and heals a man on the Sabbath after challenging the Pharisees on their interpretation of the Law and whether you could help someone on the Sabbath. The Pharisees remain silent to his question, and Jesus is grieved at the hardness of their hearts. Mark 3:6 tells us that it was after this encounter that the Pharisees began to make plans to kill Jesus.

Hold that thought as we go back to today’s reading. The Pharisees are not interested in Jesus’ understanding of divorce as much as they are trying to trap Jesus into teaching against the law of Moses. The law of Moses allows for *men* to divorce their wives – who are little more than property. The wives have little to no rights. And Jesus reminds them that Moses gave them this provision, not because it was the right thing to do, but because their hardened hearts wanted it. The same hardened hearts that demanded a healing be postponed due to the Sabbath commandment of rest.

This reading is not about two people who fall in love, marry, and then find that the promises made to each other cannot be fulfilled. That isn’t how marriage happened in the culture and time of Jesus. Marriage was a property exchange. This isn’t about dreams shattered or hearts broken – this is about the Law. So, when Jesus states that a woman has the same culpability as her husband – he is elevating her status to be equal to her husband’s status which is unheard of in that time and culture.

In ancient Rome, hierarchy and power resemble a pyramid. At the top is Caesar who is considered a god and holds ultimate power. Money, land ownership, nationality, social status, gender, and age all define where on the pyramid you land. The less privilege you hold, the further down you fall on the pyramid.

Just as marriage in the time and culture of Jesus is not anything like marriage in our day and age – neither is how we see children. Children were a commodity who are seen as workers or heirs. Think of Abraham and Sarah. When God changes Abram’s name to Abraham and promises him rewards, Abraham points out that it doesn’t matter since, without children, all God gives him will go to one of his servants. A child’s value was tied to economics.

Jesus is basically taking that pyramid of the rich and powerful and flipping it upside down and saying, “This is how things are in God’s kingdom.” “The last shall be first and the first shall be last.” “Blessed are the poor and the merciful and the peacemakers.” “It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” It’s no wonder the rich and powerful wanted to get rid of him.

I would argue that it all comes down to whether or not we have allowed our hearts to become hardened. Matthew 22:36-40: “*Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*” *Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’*” If our hearts are hardened, we cannot follow the great command to love God and one another – because they are connected one to another. We cannot love God without loving our sister/brother.

When our hearts become hardened, we become so attached to the law or church traditions or Robert’s Rules or our By-Laws or any other procedure that brings order to life that we will use this order to wound instead of to heal. Rules and order have their place, but they are never more important than people. Remember that we did a rewind of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus also said this to the Pharisees: “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.” Throughout the Gospel, Jesus shows again and again that people are what matters.

Over the next few weeks, we will be seeing Jesus take our common understanding of how life should be lived and turn it upside down. It will also be a lesson on what it means to be a disciple. Today is a reminder that as disciples we need to keep our hearts open and flexible and, yes, vulnerable.

If we close our hearts to one another, we will also close our hearts to God – as God shows God’s self in the most vulnerable around us – like the children in our midst. The kingdom of God belongs to the most vulnerable and those easily pushed aside in society. And it is our task to care for them and to follow their lead as they will lead us to the kingdom.

Amen.