

Proper 22 B

God, Evil and Marriage

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

Mark 10:2-6

I do not quite understand how the folks who select lessons make decisions. In the Job reading there is a hidden jump, which makes it confusing. It begins with the first couple of verses of the book, by describing Job. Then the reading jumps over all the rest of the first chapter, and, with no warning whatsoever, land us at the beginning of chapter 2.

Now chapter one has in it the initial conversation between Satan and God, which sets up the rest of the book. The conversation between Satan and God that we heard this morning has a precursor conversation in which Satan says to God, “Well, of course Job is righteous. Look what you’ve done for him. He’s rich! But take away his wealth and he will not acknowledge you.” So the lesson doesn’t warn you that this is the second conversation, Satan upping the ante from suggesting wealth is Job’s price to suggesting that his physical well being is the price.

One gets a hint of this when God says, “He persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.” That’s the warning that there’s a previous conversation which isn’t in this morning’s reading.

This can be confusing.

What, however, is going on? In a strange way, this is a precursor to what I want to say about the gospel. We’re dealing here with an understanding of divine being which is profound but, nevertheless, presented to us in some rather primitive linguistic clothing. And we don’t get the point until we ask concerning the end of the story. That, which is not in this lesson, is that Job refuses to speak evil of God through the whole story, even in the face of conversations with some “friends” which would have driven me right over the edge. With friends such as Job’s one needs no enemies.

Ironically, Job’s friends use lovely rhetoric, but in my judgment meaningless theology, and, pastorally, they flunk. When someone is in trouble you don’t go to them to say “I know you are getting what you deserve. I just don’t know why you deserve it. Seek in yourself and discover your guilt and, if you can not, just bow to superior power.” God is great and, therefore, whatever he does is right. I shiver, when I hear that. This is the root justification for most abusive relationships. He who has the power is right. Any theology, any theology at all, which justifies God on the basis of his raw power is utterly dangerous.

Fortunately, that isn’t the last word in the book of Job. The last word is God paying Job compensation. He does, you know. You see the precursor of that in today’s reading when God admits “. . . he persists in his integrity even though you incited me against him to destroy him for no reason . . .” What do we call destroying a person for no reason when a human being does it?

Comment: Murder

Yes, or, if it doesn’t proceed quite that far let’s use a broader term, malice. So what we have

pictured here, if we take the text honestly, is divine malice. God says it: You incited me to destroy him for no reason and I gave you permission to proceed.

It is interesting that commentators tend to deal with this by not noting that it happens. We have, within scripture, a concept of a God who could be incited to do such things.

Now we would be mistaken in the purpose of Job if we believed that that was what the book was trying to communicate. Like so many stories, there are pieces attached to it which I wouldn't want to take literally, but which, in the literary sense, are essential to the development of the story. In a literary sense, the book of Job is not a history, but a short story punctuated with philosophical dialogs. It comes out of a culture which does not function in terms of abstract philosophical discussions, but out of story telling as a way of thinking through to the roots of things. That's what the Book of Job is, a philosophical story.

If you look closely at the ending of Job, the compensation paid to Job by God is the same as that required by the Torah from human beings in cases of false or malicious accusation.

So I think the Book of Job is constructed in such a way that God, incited to a false accusation, a test of Job, is then required by his own law to pay the compensation required by a malicious attack. The compensation is what the law says it should be.

They don't tell you this is Sunday School, but it does puts a different light on the story. What we have in Job is an author capable using traditional material in a radical way. What the author wants to establish is not that what God does is right because God does it – the compensation paid by divine being points in the opposite direction – but the mysteriousness of the existence of evil. Why would the presumably beneficent God give us evil? The attempts of Job's friends to reason it out, to justify this current state of things, go on for chapter after chapter. I do not think the author comes to a conclusion. He talks about several possible conclusions and Job's friends are the vehicles for this discussion.

You all know the horrible joke about Job's friends don't You? The name of the shortest man in scripture? Bildad the Shuhite, one of the friends. (Deep groans.) So, if asked in your next Bible quiz, the shortest man in the Bible is only the height of a shoe. Bildad the Shuhite.

Comment: That is lame!

I warned you.

Comment: And the shortest man in the New Testament?

You're on.

Comment: Peter, he slept on his watch.

All right, two strikes and we're out. The third one is reserved for coffee hour. One of the points to Job, not perhaps the point, but one of them, is to say that the problem of evil cannot be solved

by appealing to the power of God. God's power does not make whatever happens all right. It's a negative conclusion, but an extremely important one because in my pastoral experience people would rather believe themselves guilty and deserving of death than believe that bad things happen for no reason. When bad things start to happen, one of the commonest statements I hear is, "Why is God doing this to me? What am I supposed to be learning from this?" Frequently, there is no answer. Beyond a certain point there is nothing to be learned from evil, it is just evil. Sure, let's do what we can to salvage it, to learn from it, but all those answers – and Job is, I think, right about this, all those answers only take us so far.

Now, on that negative note, let me move to the Gospel and this rather difficult passage about divorce. The material directly quoted from Jesus falls into two parts. First, there is the material in his public teaching, then, somewhat later, the private explanation. The two have quite different tones. The idea of Jesus giving private teaching following public teaching is a favorite gospel device used to introduce positions held by the later church.

So Jesus ends his teaching by saying, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you . . . (About the certificate of divorce.) But from the beginning of creation God made them male and female, for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh, so they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." That's the end of the first block of teaching material.

But then, for some unexplained reason, the disciples ask Jesus again about the matter. That the second teaching takes place "in the house" means it takes place privately. But Mark has the disciples asking again and we get the business of divorce being equivalent to adultery and all that.

Now the way I read this text, and you're free to read it differently, is that the only part of it that has a ghost of a chance of being traced back to Jesus is the public teaching. The second part represents an interpretation of the early church. I think this because we have differing interpretations of divorce legislation in two other places in the New Testament. First, Matthew tells the story somewhat differently. And Paul tells it quite differently. When Paul speaks of divorce he admits he is contradicting Jesus. He says, Jesus doesn't say it this way, but I do. His issue was the newly converted Christian divorced by a pagan spouse. Does the divorced Christian need to consider the marriage still valid? And Paul answers, "No. The Christian spouse is free to marry again." That constitutes a divorce. There is no way around it. So, in the New Testament itself, we have different voices saying different things about divorce. If the position of Jesus had been anything like as clear as Mark's private teaching makes it, we would not be hearing these different voices.

You see, we can't have it both ways. One cannot say that the early church preserved the teaching of Jesus in an accurate way and then appeal to the variety of witnesses to Jesus in order to justify divergence in the tradition of his teaching. I think the early church didn't have a clear and precise tradition on divorce from Jesus. So the Pauline church, the Matthean Church, the Markan Church, all developed slightly different understandings of how divorce ought to be handled inside the church. I think a variety of opinions on the issue goes back to the first

century. That variety of opinion is reflected in the text of the New Testament itself.

This, in turn, points to an interesting aspect of the church's use of scripture: No matter what our questions are, we look for an answer to them in the Bible. I entertain, in a hidden and secret compartment in the back of my mind, that maybe the Bible has other things to do in the formation of our spiritual lives than answer questions we ask. Maybe, in order to understand the Bible, we need to figure out the questions it is asking us, and not the ones we ask of it. Maybe we, along with the Pharisees, are asking the wrong question for the wrong reason when we ask concerning the legality of divorce. Jesus clearly doesn't think much of their question, so why should we assume that he's really trying to answer it? Maybe the beginning is not the question of divorce, maybe the beginning needs to be the Bible's message listened to on our part. The law is for justice and compassion – listen for them!

It used to be the habit that in Episcopal Churches you'd walk into the church five or ten minutes early, and sit quietly until the service began. That period of quiet was for listening, before the congregation began talking to God. Silence to listen, first.

All too often in the church's use of scripture we don't begin with appropriate silence. We begin with a question which arises out of our culture, out of the way we frame questions. Then, because the Bible is supposed to be the authority, we get into trouble because we do find the answer to our questions there. When we start tracing the history of the church's answers to these questions, such as divorce, we discover a peculiar thing: the Bible is interpreted largely in accord with whatever the dominant position is in the culture. That's what happens when we ask our questions, rather than seek the Bible's questions. I doubt the answers we find to our questions have much to do with Jesus.

So, on this question of divorce, the church has made rules for centuries, claiming biblical authorization, as if the Bible spoke with a united voice. This dishonest ignoring of a complex tradition in favor of a simple rule is what frequently happens when we pull answers to our questions from scripture rather than finding in scripture the questions God would ask of us.

Let's look at what (I think.) Jesus was trying to say. First, the word for "test", "the Pharisees came to test him." The Greek word is *peirasmos*, exactly the same word we find in the Lord's Prayer, translated as either test or temptation, "Do not lead us into temptation" is "do not allow us to experience *peirasmos*. So what the Pharisees are here doing to Jesus is precisely what we pray, in the Lord's Prayer, not to experience from God. This is the starting point for a helpful interpretation of this story.

The test is the question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" The question is phrased like that because that's the way the question was always phrased in the ancient Jewish legal tradition. The idea of the wife divorcing the husband didn't occur, although it occurred in several of the surrounding cultures. Assyrian and Babylonian law even allows prenuptial agreements. If the marriage doesn't work out, the discarded wife gets an annuity for life. We have the documentation. Nothing new under the sun.

Where does the test come in this? If Jesus says that divorce is unlawful, he has placed

himself outside Jewish tradition. If he says “yes” and this is the unspoken background, he will need to make a decision as to which school of Jewish law on the matter he opts for. Will it be the school of Hillel or the School of Shammai? And whatever one he opts for the other will be irritated with him. The test here is that Jesus is being put in a place, asked a question, which will make enemies for him no matter how he answers it.

But more fundamental, the question being asked does not arise from scripture itself which asks, “What can we do to make sure that justice is given to women who are divorced?” No, the question behind the Pharisee’s use of scripture is, “What can we do to discredit Jesus?” And true questions used for unworthy or immoral purposes never express the will of God, even though they be formally true.

Comment: That sounds pretty political.

Of course it is, but being put to the test is always a matter of establishing power over others, and that’s political.

Jesus is a pretty good politician, he knows how to answer one question with another. So he asks a question of his own: “What did Moses command you?” In other words, you answer your own question. They said, “Moses allows a man to write a certificate of dismissal and divorce her.” The point to the certificate, by the way, is that it is written evidence of the divorce and thus the foundation for the right of the woman to remarry. It is the one case in ancient Hebrew jurisprudence requiring a written document. Why a written one? So that in whatever community the divorced woman shows up, she has at her disposal, unassailable evidence that she is free to remarry.

Jesus responds that God wrote this commandment, humane as it was, because of the hardness of their hearts. Hardness of heart means, here, the same as in the rest of the Old Testament, that one doesn’t discern the presence of God in situations in which God is present. Not cruelty, but lack of apprehension. This fits in with what Jesus then says: “From creation God made human beings male and female.” If you only pay attention to the legalities of the situation, and not to the divine purpose behind and beyond the legalities, and sometimes even nullifying them, you won’t figure out what’s really going on, what marriage is really about.

What God has joined together, let no one separate. Notice that in this passage, Jesus does not make a definitive statement about the legality of divorce. He doesn’t do what the Pharisees ask him to do. All he says is, consider the purposes of God in creating marriage in the first place. All this business that sharpens up the amorphous response of Jesus, the private teaching in the house, is, I believe, a red herring. Jesus asks the Pharisees not to make human pain without relevance to their understanding of the law. He asks them to consider the ultimate compassionate purpose of God, to provide for human companionship. To give a direct and precise answer to their question would not allow either of those things to take place, it would always place the law above human need. And so I’m led to believe that the private teaching (“in the house”) is an early church introjection into the text – not that that makes any difference one way or another, but it does clarify the confusion over the issue of divorce in the New Testament. The early church spoke with a divided voice. One needs to look at one’s own culture, one’s own

situation, at how human relationships work and don't work here and now, and make up one's own mind, but always taking into account first the purposes of a loving God and only then the precise interpretation of the laws. We cannot go to the past for a cookie cutter opinion which will be either just or loving.

That's that. We can't go the past and get a cookie cutter which will give either just or loving solutions. It becomes the responsibility of the community in it's current life to struggle, to figure out how, in our circumstance, to express justice and love on questions of marriage. It is, yes, I can use the words, both cowardly and stupid to believe that such complex things can be answered by quoting a single sentence from an old book, even if that old book is the Bible. God does not take responsibility for a challenging love away from us in order to present us with such easy yes and no solutions.

That's all I have to say on that. Please stand for the creed.