

## JESUS IN THE MIDDLE

A Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Year B), October 4, 2009

Text: Mark 10:2-16

They asked a question to *test* him? Why? In order to put Jesus between a rock and a hard place. If Jesus took a “hard” line, he might put off the people who liked him best. His devotees were not a bunch of saints. If he took a “soft” line, he would be undermining the authority of Scripture. How could Jesus win?

**The fact is, Jesus did not come to lay down the law; nor to lay aside the law; but to lay down his life. . . .** *Not to lay down the law; nor to lay aside the law; but to lay down his life.*

Chapter 8 of John finds Jesus in a similar bind. Pharisees and Scribes brought Jesus a woman who had been caught in adultery. They reminded him what Moses said—that she ought to be stoned to death. Then they asked him, “What do you say?” John comments: “They said this to test him—*so that they might have some charge to bring against him.*” Their agenda was not to learn anything, but to destroy Jesus.

Since chapter three in Mark we have known that these people were out to destroy Jesus. Mark tells us the Pharisees were offended because Jesus broke Moses’ law by healing someone on the Sabbath. “Immediately they went out and conspired—*with the Herodians*—how to destroy him.”

Politics makes strange bedfellows. Herodians made odd allies for the Pharisees. They were supporters of the dynasty of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas, the son, had little respect for the Law of Moses. He once built a town on top of a cemetery, creating a scandal. The Pharisees, on the other hand, loved the Law of Moses. But apparently they both wanted Jesus out of the way.

They had partnered before. John the Baptist had attracted a great following with his teaching, called the Pharisees and Scribes a “brood of vipers.” But then he denounced Herod. He made the mistake of saying in public that it was wicked for Herod Antipas to get his brother (also named Herod) to divorce his wife (Herodias) so *he* could marry her. So Herod arrested John the Baptist, and Herodias got her new husband to kill him.

So remember this background to today’s Gospel:

- In Chapter 3 of Mark, Pharisees began to conspire with the Herodians to destroy Jesus.
- In Chapter 6, John the Baptist was beheaded for denouncing the divorce and remarriage of Herodias.
- Then, in chapter 10, the Pharisees came and asked Jesus, in public, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

They were not asking how Jesus *felt* about divorced people. They were trying to get him killed. They probably knew that Jesus got along very well with divorced people.

Why, he was friends even with people who had committed adultery. In fact, Jesus did not judge such people!

For example, in John 8, when they brought Jesus a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery and they tried to get his complicity in their stoning her, he coined the phrase “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone,” and they all walked away! Then he asked her, “Is there no one left to accuse you?” She said, “No one.” Then he said, “*Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.*”

And the woman at the well in Samaria? It turned out that Jesus knew she had been divorced five times, and yet he shocked her *not* by condemning her but by asking her for a drink of water as if she were just as good as anyone else. Another time, Jesus was pleased when a woman with a bad reputation came and started washing his feet while he was at table in a Pharisee’s house. Everyone else was upset with this—doesn’t he know what kind of woman she is?—but Jesus told the others that he appreciated her love for him. Jesus even called the people of Jerusalem “murderers,” and then in the next breath said he wanted to gather them under his wings as a hen gathers her chicks.

(In fact, the only sinners I remember Jesus being angry at were some law-abiding merchants in the temple.)

The Pharisees were reformers in Galilee. But their idea of reforming Galilee was to increase compliance with the Law of Moses, because the Law of Moses had fallen into disuse up north.

So they asked him, “*Is it lawful,*” etc. They were testing him. They thought they could trick him into the open. Tattletales would pass the denunciation on to Herodias, she would be incensed once again, and hopefully she would take care of Jesus.

Well, Jesus did not disappoint. First he offended the Pharisees by accusing them of “hardness of heart.” Then he contradicted Moses, not by making the rule about divorce weaker, but by making it more stringent.

Pardon me for stating the obvious: *Jesus was not a middle child.* Not a flexible, diplomatic peacemaker. He did not mind offending anyone. He was one tough rabbi. Remember how he once said that a man is guilty of adultery if he even looks at a woman and lusts after her?

Jesus was not a middle child. *But he was a middleman.* We see that in what happened next.

The scene shifted. Jesus was not on the defense any more. Now he had the ball, and he would talk about what *he* wanted to talk about.

Do you remember I said Jesus came not to lay down the law; nor to lay aside the law; but to lay down his life . . .

They were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples were speaking sternly to the parents. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “*Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom*

of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

I’m afraid the Pharisees had left by this point, which is too bad. Because they were not thinking deeply enough. They were always assuming *that your relationship with God depends on how close you are to being fully compliant with the regulations of God.*

They were wrong. It depends on your simply coming to God like a child and allowing God to take you on his lap and bless you.

That means you as you are. The good *and* the bad of you. You as a whole person, not just your strong points, your virtues.

*“How Great I Am” works on a resume, but the hymn is called “How Great Thou Art.”*

How *people* receive each other is closely linked to people’s *evaluation* of each other. We welcome people we like, who meet our standards. We reject people we don’t like, those who are not up to snuff. For goodness’ sake, *even in our charity* we prefer to help only people we somehow approve of.

Jesus knew that people imagine God is like that, too.

But no. God receives all who come. In fact, Jesus told us and showed us that God makes a point of taking people from the end of the line and letting them go first.

We know this by how Jesus was, what he said, what he did, and what happened to him. That is what it means to believe in Jesus. He said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” Jesus is the middleman, the medium, the means by which we *know* the love God bears for us.

I asked at the beginning, “How could Jesus win?”

The answer is: He didn’t want to win. He wanted us to win, and for that he laid down his life. So that we, and our friends, and even our enemies, even people we don’t admire or like, might live together in the kingdom of God. On God’s capacious lap. Amen.