

Not Being Perfect,

Year B

Pentecost 18

October 4, 2009

St. Paul's United Church, Richmond, ON

18th Sunday After Pentecost 2009

Hebrews 1:1-4 and 2:5-12

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Mark 10:2-16

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Asking questions is important. We learn by asking questions. We test ideas and actions by asking questions. Yet not all questioning does that. For there is another type of question, where insight is not looked for. It is to challenge the speaker. The challenge comes with a hidden agenda. One of the responses I have to such a question is, "What is the statement that you want to make?" For the question comes out of a settled worldview, a sense this is how it is and I want to trap you with the question. It is not asked with sincerity but with "I am going to get you."

Jesus' encounter about divorce illustrates such a question. He is being tested to see if he is an authentic teacher. There is no sense of, "I want to learn," in the question. It is clear from how Jesus responded that he understands the question as a trap.

Mark also has an agenda. There was an issue of whether Jesus was an authentic teacher. Mark wants to answer that question.

The issue is how do we know this person is from God? How is God reflected in the words and actions of this person? To answer, Mark uses the templates of his time. He uses the different understandings of the religious communities of how one would recognize this person as a prophet. Did the teachings fit with Moses? Is it Elijah? Part of the problem with such questions is it freezes the ongoing experience in past and fixed moments. Both Hebrews and Mark are suggesting a dynamic nature of God. There is more than one way of speaking about God and tradition is emerging, changing not fixed.

The question of divorce suggests this dynamic nature of God, that the incarnation of God is always in this moment and evolving. Now how do I get to this? That is a good question.

Jesus recognizes there is a statement behind the question. He knows the questioners have the answer. "What did Moses say?" An honest exchange would have begun with, "This is the tradition, what do you say?" Jesus gets them to show their cards.

Embedded in the question is a view of the perfect answer. We have solved the human issue conclusively. Just follow the rules. I see the exchange as challenging that view for Jesus pushes the listeners into a new understanding. In the old view there were exceptions. A man could divorce a woman but a woman had no power to do that. The answer Jesus gives demands a rethinking of what was taken as a perfect and absolute standard. It is almost saying, "Committed relationships trump truth."

Still, the response could be read as an absolute standard. However, I read it as there is no absolute standard, but that we are called upon to expand our understandings of how we are to live together. It is to base our experience on the idea of who we are. We are relational. Our identity is not self contained but is created by relationships. It makes us ask good questions: how to be one body yet deal with the imperfections that make us human. The question is, how are we to be faithful to one another in times of change and adversity? How are we to be faithful to our relational reality, to our environment and other people when we live in a world that has broken the unity and moved us into 'me first'?

Jesus offers a new view of equality in the idea of one flesh. We are joined in relationships and this means our views must exhibit that reality. In one sense the response is, "How do we live with one another and respect the views of one another?" It is to say we have intrinsic worth and taking seriously the other as having such value. In this our experience is made more beautiful. It is to see we are, metaphorically, one flesh. We are one with others. We are one with nature. The response rejects the view that nature is different from us and others are different. For the response says we are one flesh.

In a world where we bicker, pout, and get hurt we seek ways of being a community where we honour differences and are one body. We worry about people who leave the church, as we should, but we never learn that they leave for a host of reasons. Often it is a search for the perfect community. Well, there is no such a community. We are an imperfect community and that is good. For perfect communities have it all figured out and their questions are based on that. They seek to find how one is out of step, they seek the perfect standard without understanding that standards are evolving and what is crucial is to begin with one flesh. We are in this together and together we will continue to work on how we shall be a community that accepts tensions and seek to find a solution. Those solutions will not be one size fits all, but good answers they lead to better questions.

Now this may seem like a big job. There are clues in the passage about being like a child. Children were disposable in the culture of the time. Yet here in the text the child is blessed. Jesus again challenges. He doesn't play by the rules.

What is honoured by the blessing of the child is an honouring of the those who had no place, were of no value. This questions how we value others. How we value the natural world. Their value is intrinsic not us giving value. This changes how we relate.

In the idea of one flesh are two insights that will aid us in our journey. The first is we find our unity in God. It is the love of God is relational. It stretches across time and space and is found in many voices, yet is of one source. There are a thousand names for God.

God is on the move. Our experience of God evolves and changes and grows. The consistency is the love or aim of God. From the edge of reality, in the imperfections of experience, in those who are the edge and vulnerable comes the love of God.

The dream of God is for unity and diversity. This God is not an unmoved distant ideal who only speaks through lofty phrases which leave your heart cold. This God is not a ruthless moralist who seeks to punish everyone for all their wrongs.

This is the dream of a relational God. A God who seeks to be in relationship with us.

This is a God who knows each of us intimately.

*This is a God who cares for all of us passionately. **

We are one flesh with this God for God is in us and in this world, loving it into new realities. There is a unity in this love. We are reminded of this unity and diversity in the table, this world wide communion Sunday.

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* Thanks to James Murray