

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
Pentecost(P22B), October 4, 2009
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer
"The Inclinable Heart"

"But Jesus said to them, 'Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote this commandment for you.'" (Mark 10:5)

Today the lectionary has given us a tough lesson, so, instead of "copping out", like I did last Sunday, let's deal with it! It is a lesson about divorce, and, since divorce now affects one out of every three marriages, clergy included, we can hardly avoid it! But how do we do that without falling into the old trap of trying use this text to decide whether Jesus is "for" or "against" it? Or to expand the question, how do we understand God's Word without being seduced by blind literalism or its opposite, the "situation ethic?"

Sometimes inspiration, by which I mean God's voice, comes from the strangest places! It began earlier this week when I previewed the Gospel lesson for this morning. I was upset with the thought of having to deal with this text in the midst of two very busy and stressful weeks. But there it was; I couldn't avoid it. Oh, to be sure, I could have picked something out of the Hebrew's lesson, or "gone to the file," as we say in the trade, but years ago I accepted the discipline of preaching on the Gospels, *as they were provided in the Prayer Book Calendar!* So I was stuck, and I immediately offered the shortest and most often used intercessory prayer in the English language: **Help!**

The first answer came when I remembered the words of an anthem that we used to sing at Holy Cross Church when I was Rector. It has a rather spectacular ending. All of the voices sing the final phrase at different levels, following their own parts. Thus that final line comes across quite powerfully. The line is really a prayer: "that we may walk with a perfect heart..." Who in the world has a perfect heart?" Then our text for today popped into my head: *"But Jesus said to them, 'Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote this commandment for you."*

A second answer came when I remembered an old friend, a clergyman who has now died but was once my boss in a large parish in Pennsylvania. He often told the story of the time he went to dinner at a parishioner's house. It was a large meal and my friend could not finish everything on his plate, including the coleslaw. As mother was removing his plate, the daughter cried: "Oh, Mommy! You're not going to throw away that slaw, are you?" Quite naturally the mother said, "Yes, I am, dear. Father Kemp can't finish it." "But Mommy," said the child. "You can't, because in church this morning we kept saying it over and over again!" "What did we say," asked Father Kemp? Quite excited, she replied, "Everytime you read a sentence, Father, we answered *"Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law."* Obviously, It was the response of the people to each com-mandment in the Decalogue, Rite One. This was a moment of remembrance, for It suddenly became very clear to me that in our text for today, Jesus was talking not about laws, but about the heart; the "inclinable" human heart!

Whether or not Jesus intended it at the time, his use of the heart as a focus for his teaching can only be understood in modern language if we look at it as a metaphor. For example, we know that the heart cannot really change its position, at least in the sense of inclination toward a different direction. We also

know that the heart is not really "hard" in terms of texture. Furthermore, we know that people in the time of Jesus believed that the heart was the "seat" of knowledge and reasoning, just as the bowels were thought to be the "seat" of the emotions. Therefore we must understand that "hardness of heart" describes an inability to change one's thinking, and, consequently one's behavior and feeling. Thus Jesus was pointing toward the mercy of a God who realizes that we humans cannot live up to perfection. In the metaphorical language of the anthem, the heart "inclines" away from virtue and toward sin, simply because we are not gods, even though we try to be! Jesus then goes on to give these "testy" Pharisees a theological "zinger." He tells them that the *intention* of God at creation was for the hearts of men and women to be joined as one. Male and female hearts are intended to be inclined *toward* each other!

Jesus also did at least two other things in this short passage. First, he taught these law-abiding Pharisees that there is a "spirit" behind the law. It is no less than God's Spirit that shows us the mercy of divine forgiveness when we fail, when we fall short of the Law. This same "Spirit" is also able to change us if we will allow it. It can "soften" our hearts and incline them toward the virtue of the law. "*Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law.*"

Second, Jesus did something that has been acknowledged by scholars as quite radical for his time. In a culture where wives could be "put away" by a simple piece of parchment, Jesus pointed beyond the law to the virtue behind it, and instantly elevated the status of women to that of *equal!* The joining is that of two *equal hearts*; "*they are no longer two but one...*" It seems that it's much more than a simple "inclination."

Now then, having said all this about the metaphor of hearts and their inclinations, what can we say about divorce, especially in its *modern* setting? This is not easy, but we can say the same thing *now* that Jesus said *then*: **God still allows** for divorce because of the hardness of our hearts, but it is certainly not God's intention! I believe this is the most succinct statement about divorce that you will find among the majority of Episcopalians. It is the position taken by the Bishop of this Diocese, and by most of his Priests.

Having said this, there now remains two issues with which we need to deal. The first involves the proverbial "ounce of prevention." What can we do to prevent the breakup of our marriages? Simple, using the very behavior of Jesus himself as our model, we can incline our hearts toward the virtue of *unconditional* love! Simple? Yes, but maybe not very easy!

Years ago, following the diagnosis of my Leukemia, my wife Carrie and I went to a conference where Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and her staff offered a workshop entitled "Life, Death and Transition." Both of us intended to do some very hard work around how to handle the obvious stress in our lives, but we also hoped to learn more about the healing principle that Elizabeth has included in her writings for years, the virtue of "unconditional love." As I understand it, this is none other than the love described and acted out by Jesus, the love that attaches no strings, or "conditions", and expects nothing in return. It is the love that flows through and is "inclined" toward the "other" without restriction.

I thought about this love the other day when I went outside after all that rain. I went out to look specifically at the small stream that flows along the one side of our property. We live on the side of a mountain ["Pig Pen Mountain, in case you forgot!"] and so the stream comes down in a series of cascades tumbling down to the valley. At various points, in the little pools that have been formed in the rocks, the falling leaves had been pressed together to form a

beautiful, multicolored-colored natural dam. This of course restricted the flow of water somewhat and the more pressure there was from the water, the more the leaves were pressed into the dam and the more the water was restricted, etc. It would be the same up there right now except that some meddling priest came along with his stick and pushed on the pile of leaves, breaking up the dam and releasing the water pressure. It even had a "cascading" effect, as the extra pressure broke up each succeeding pile of leaves! How much like life this is, I thought. When we allow stress to pile up the "leaves" in our lives, the dam is formed and the flow of love is restricted. If only we could learn to break up the dams in our married lives so that unconditional love can freely flow, if only our hearts could be so inclined!

Sometimes they are not, however, and I think this is the root cause for the breakup of our families. It remains now to look at what we can do when that happens. It isn't easy, but guess what? It's the *same principle, the same virtue!* It's none other than a similar application of *unconditional love!* It's none other than "an inclination" of the heart. **Divorce happens, and it can only be healed by a strong application of unconditional love!** There is life after divorce, but only if the heart is so inclined.

Have you seen the movie, "Dances with Wolves?" If not, please do rent the video, because there is something important to be learned from Kevin Kostner's presentation of life among the Lakota Sioux. Even though we might think their behavior to be a bit barbaric, the bottom line is that among the members of their own tribe, the Indians practiced *unconditional* love. They loved each other fully, even to the point of death, and possibly beyond. Before the young white soldier, played by Kostner, could be accepted into the Sioux society, it had to be determined whether or not his "heart" was in the right place! "Even then," said the medicine man who had befriended him, "it was hard for me to like you, because *my* heart was so full of grief for my brother who had just died. Then I realized," he continued, "that maybe my brother went away so that you could come!" Ironically it was a woman who "meddled with the leaves", thereby braking the dam, and allowing love to flow unrestricted between them. Their hearts were inclined toward each other. Thus, even after total brokenness, even after hearts have been separated by death *or divorce*, even after we are inclined in opposite directions, there can be healing. But it can only happen if someone "wraps" us up in unconditional love.

In short, what Jesus is asking us to do today is to deal with the "hardness" of our hearts by allowing him to come into our lives and "massage" them with his love, his unconditional love, so *that* we might be "inclined to virtue", to the "spirit" *behind* the law that makes us equals; so *that* we might be "declined from sin", from the tendency to build dams that prevent the flow of this love; so *that* "we may walk with a perfect heart" before him now and always. Well, maybe *not* perfect, but at least that is our intention, if not our "inclination!"

I have not checked with Guy, but it's possible that at the BBQ next Saturday, there will be coleslaw? Perhaps, no matter how much is left over, God will incline our hearts to keep this slaw!