

Sermon: Pentecost 20

The Rev. Mike Wernick

October 7, 2018

Year B

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

Psalm 26

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

Mark 10:2-16

Why are we tested... and by whom... do we test others... and what motivates us to do that... is it our broken self-esteem... do we do it... to feel better about ourselves... does it come from the unconscious ways we buy into the cultural messages which diminish us... which jack-hammer away at our sense of being beloved... pounding away at the gains we've made... so that instead of loving ourselves for who we are... and for who we are becoming... we end up disliking... or even hating ourselves... for who we're not...

Why are we tested... does God test us... and what might God's motivation be... only to try and trip us up... to see just how faithful we really are... or perhaps to see when we're ready for... and capable of... taking on more responsibility... in Luke Jesus said... *From everyone to whom much has been given... much will be required...* I mean... we wouldn't want someone who can't drive a car... to fly us to Hawaii... would we...

So some Pharisees came... and to test Jesus... they asked him about whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife... *of course it is...* he said... *you know full well that Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal... but why do you ask... is it to maintain a woman's lower status... and if a woman is less than a man... why is it the man who leaves his father and mother... why isn't it the woman...*

And when Jesus was with the disciples... he did what he often did... he turned the tables... and said that it didn't matter which one divorced the other... both commit adultery... and it is especially difficult to hear this... especially if we take it at face value... or hear it as judgment... or if we have been divorced...

Jesus made this claim... because sexual relations between a married man... and an unmarried woman... was simply... fornication... but sexual relations between a married man... and a woman who was married... or even simply betrothed... was adultery... and why... because she was another man's property... that's one reason why there was a double standard... because if she became pregnant... before paternity testing... you'd always know who the mother was... but you couldn't always be sure who the father was... and no man would ever want his fortune to be inherited by a male child who was not his own...

And we may not practice it... but the vestige of an ancient Mosaic law... set forth in Numbers 5:11-31... is still at work in our collective consciousness... and demonstrates just how superstitious our ancestors were... it dictated that a wife suspected of infidelity... or whose husband was even... just simply jealous of her... that wife should be tried by the ordeal of the Water of Jealousy... you can't make this stuff up... it is a humiliating... sexist practice that smacks of magic... and which threatens to curse the woman... if she has committed adultery and lies... by making her uterus drop and her womb discharge... it's all right there in Numbers... and this passage is taped up in the hallway...

And we also know... that two thousand years ago... Jesus was invited to join a posse of men who again wanted to test him... and who wanted to destroy a woman... who wanted to stone her to death... because of this double standard... Jesus chose to liberate her... he chose instead to call out the hypocrisy of the religious... and said... *Let anyone among you who is without sin... be the first to throw a stone at her...*

And while today's passage from Job says that Job did not sin with his lips... I wonder... did he sin in his heart... Jesus said that it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles... but it's what comes out of the mouth... and that comes from the heart...

Catherine Miles Wallace, PhD... is an author... literary critic... and cultural historian... on October 4, 1992... she gave a talk at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Evanston, IL... I found her lecture printed as a little Forward Movement tract... entitled A Sexual Ethics for My Children... it addressed relationships... intimacy of all kinds... and divorce... and something she wrote helped me come to terms with the guilt I felt about my own divorce... she said...

Sexuality, then, is a sacrament. It is the sacrament called "matrimony," a sacrament on top of which churches have... for the last few centuries... also added the legal contract of marriage. The contractual language [often] states... "til death do us part." But the more humble... more realistic... more deeply Christian recognition is that this sacramental relationship will endure [only] as long... as openness to God's grace endures... on both sides. It will endure only as long as the two people can remain blessings for one another. [But] that will not always be forever. We all have had relationships that were genuinely blessings in our lives... but not genuinely forever. I have lots of memories... she wrote... that I know are blessed memories. The not-forever part was hard at the time... and it was scary... but I also know that blessings often force me into new growth... or into new knowledge about myself...

When Jesus said... *if she divorces her husband and marries another...* he not only elevates women in an unprecedented way... making them equal partners with their husbands... but he also brings men down a few rungs... and makes them subject to the same consequences women faced... because divorce is a kind of violence... that tears families apart... and there are culpable victims... and innocent victims...

Bahá'u'lláh... was the founder of the Bahá'í Faith... his eldest son `Abdu'l-Bahá'... wrote about one of the tenants of the faith... he wrote... *until equality between man and woman is fully established and attained... the highest social development of humankind is not possible... and that equality is dependent on the privilege of equal education... in past ages... he wrote... humanity has been [defective and] inefficient because it has*

been incomplete... war and its ravages have blighted the world... but the education of woman will be a mighty step toward ending it... for she will use her whole influence against war... woman will refuse to give her sons for sacrifice upon the field of battle...

We still suffer from an ancient patriarchy... that seeks to establish peace more through human violence... like the *Pax Romana*... than through God's justice... also known as the Peace Which Passes Understanding... and establishing this peace will require searching for Truth that rises above fact... And it is sad... because regardless of what happened in Washington yesterday... there is resistance to this justice... in the bedroom... in the boardroom... in women's paychecks... and in the on-going double-standard between what is acceptable for men... and what is unacceptable for women...

And you know... perhaps... some of the stories told on each side have been exaggerated... but then we have to ask why... is one side afraid of losing power... and is the other side afraid of not being believed... of being subjected... even figuratively... to the Water of Jealousy...

Job may not have sinned against God with his lips... but perhaps he sinned with them... against his wife... because instead of calling her comment foolish... instead of characterizing something she said... as foolish... he sought to take what she did... and turn it into what she was... a member of the Sisterhood of Foolish Women... and this came out of his heart... and while the story itself may not be fact... it is sadly... based in the Truth of what we do... Why are we tested... and by whom... is the Book of Job fact... that God allowed the Satan to test Job's faith... or is it more about the Truth of how we test each other... and like Job's friends... figure we must get what we deserve... what if we use our free will to impose hurt on each other... and don't deserve all of it... and maybe part of the test... is to see whether we expect what we have... and more... or whether we are grateful for what we have... because all we have... and all we are... and all we will become... comes from God...