

“How We Read Scripture”  
The Rev. Lauren McDonald  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA  
18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - October 4, 2009  
Mark 10:2-16

I don't know how many of you have had the opportunity to read your October newsletter yet, but if you have, you will have read Michael's cover article about the debates we're starting during the Adult Forum today. I hope he doesn't mind that I'm going to share one of his paragraphs with you. He says, “While the content of these debates will hopefully prove informative and provocative, the core purpose of this exercise is to show how people can share constructive conversation around sensitive issues where there is disagreement, without fostering a climate of verbal violence or adversarial relationship.”<sup>1</sup>

It's a challenge, isn't it, to have constructive conversation around difficult issues without resorting to verbal violence or adversarial relationship? Especially when discussing things that really matter to us. When our emotions are stirred up and our passions are aroused, it's hard to listen to and respect our conversation partners. It's easy to forget Christian kindness in our desperate need to prove that we are right. Sadly, one of the things that we Christians tend to do in debate is beat each other up with scriptures. We take the word of God and we use it to verbally smack down people who disagree with us.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Delk, “Christian Debate Comes to Hickory Neck,” in *Hickory Neck Nuggets*, October 2009, p. 1.

Admittedly, Episcopalians tend to be a little insecure about their biblical knowledge because we don't regularly quote chapter and verse at each other, but when you pick the right topic, we're equally adept at swinging scriptural punches as our brothers and sisters in other denominations. My guess is that many of us have used scripture in inappropriate ways to try to win an argument. Now I don't mean to say that it's wrong to quote the Bible when we're discussing difficult things. In fact we should. We look to the Bible to help sort out where we stand on things. I guess my problem is when we take scripture out of its context and use it to try to smite other people.

In our Gospel passage this morning we see the Pharisees using scripture to try to trap Jesus. It says they were testing him by asking him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. If there's someone that you don't want to argue scripture with, it's Jesus. Although the people who argue with Jesus never seem to get that. They go right on thinking that they know the law and that he doesn't. So he turns the question around on them. "What did Moses command you?" Well, they think they know the answer here. So they refer to a passage from the Torah. It's Deuteronomy 24, verses 1-4, and indeed, those verses say that a man may write a certificate of divorce for his wife and dismiss her if he finds something about her objectionable. Now what the Pharisees are trying to do is to get Jesus to weigh in on what criteria would make divorce permissible. At the time there was a debate going on about what would constitute lawful divorce. Those questioning Jesus knew that whatever he said, he was going to anger people just as if people questioning him today were to ask him to comment about health care reform or capital punishment. They thought they had caught him in a trap.

Not so. Jesus continues the conversation with them by also quoting scripture, but he goes back before the time of the law to Genesis and talks about what God's will was for marriage from the beginning. The Pharisees are trying to test Jesus, to prove that he's on the wrong side of the law. Jesus is saying that the law was written to deal with the hardness of human hearts. When God joins people together, then ideally nothing should separate them. But of course, with our hardened hearts, we are constantly pulling apart things that have been joined together, and so Moses wrote the law that he did.

This is really tricky stuff for us today. Very few of us have been unaffected by divorce. Even if we haven't been divorced ourselves, we may have been children of divorced parents or been friends to those going through divorce or had children get divorced. Divorce hurts. We have all seen the pain that comes when something that was joined together has been torn apart. I have never been married, but I assume that those who do marry have every intention of making a lifelong commitment. No one thinks on their wedding day that one day in the future they'll be sitting down with lawyers trying to untie the knot. People who are coming together in marriage want for themselves the same wholeness that God wants for them. We can't ignore Jesus' words and pretend that divorce is a good thing because we know the incredible pain that comes with it. On the other hand we must not use Jesus' words to condemn those who have been divorced.

We have to be careful about how we read, interpret, and use scripture. It would be easy for battered spouses to hear these words and assume that they should remain in their abusive relationships. It would be easy for people who have succeeded in the hard work of keeping a marriage together to read these words and feel judgmental of those who have not had the same success. It would be easy for people experiencing divorce to read these words and turn away from the church, thinking themselves condemned when in their pain what they need most is the compassionate embrace of their church family. It is not good that we should be alone. God knows this. God created us for each other. God wills wholeness and healing for us all.

When we read the scriptures as the Pharisees did, looking for a set of rules and regulations, then we miss the point. We can certainly read the Bible through a lens of fear and judgment, finding all the ways that other people are breaking the rules and waiting for God to smite them. Or fearing all the ways that we might be breaking the rules and waiting for God to condemn us. But when we do that, we are the ones with hardened hearts. Our other choice is to read the Bible through the lens of love, God's redeeming love, a love big enough to conquer all sin, all fear, all pain. When we read the scriptures through the lens of love, the love that Jesus came to earth to show us, then we will know ourselves loved and we will share that love with those around us.