

Closing services of Synod, Kroondal (20 after Trinity) 18 October 2015 Mark 10, 1-16

1 Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them. 2 Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" 3 "What did Moses command you?" he replied. 4 They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." 5 "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. 6 "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 7 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, 8 and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." 10 When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. 11 He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. 12 And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

Dear sisters and brothers,

I would like to focus on the diverse groups that feature in this passage.

1. **The Pharisees and the disciples**

"You are a pharisee!" - hardly any body would be pleased to be called that. "You are a disciple" is a different story. Most Christians would be honoured to be called a disciple, and insulted when called a Pharisee.

At the time of Jesus the Pharisees were, however, highly respected people in society. They were known for their devotion and complete dedication to their faith.

Why then has the name such a bad connotation for us?

The reason is that in the gospels the Pharisees, almost without exception, appear as opponents of Jesus. They have made up their mind about him: Jesus was not from God, and needed to be exposed. Many encounters start with a similar sentiment than this one: "they wanted to test Jesus"

For them it is not about divorce, and even less about the people affected by it. It is a test to confirm what they already have agreed on: That Jesus is an heretic, who needs to be silenced.

They do not ask questions to learn, but to confirm their beliefs.

The disciples play a very different role. They are the learning ones. In this event it is also beautifully illustrated. After the interaction with the Pharisees, when alone with Jesus, they asked him about this.

This should be the nature of a disciple: To wish to learn from Jesus. "Jesus, what do you say? What do you mean by what you say?"

Two groups of people - disciples and Pharisees. Now the tough question is: Who is who? We no longer have the Pharisees amongst us - only disciples.

Or am I wrong?

Indeed! I believe that we do have the Pharisees among us. Where are they? When we were

gathering as synod - where were they?

One Pharisee is standing right in front of you, on this pulpit. It is me! Yes, I am a disciple, who wants to learn from Jesus. But at the same time, in me, there is the Pharisee - the one who has made up his mind, and refuses to be challenged by Jesus.

When I was part of the study commission on homosexuality I had to grapple with this Pharisee in me - because I had made up my mind on the issue, and was looking for ways to prove what I believe. Time and again, in the history of the Church, stages were reached where the Pharisees in Church put down their foot.

They declared Luther a heretic for stating that salvation is a free gift of God given to all who receive Christ in faith.

They declared Copernicus a heretic for claiming that the earth was a planet circling the sun. A hundred years ago people in our Church would be declared heretics when they claimed that women should be able to vote at AGM's or, even worse, allowed to be pastors. Less than sixty years ago people were expelled from our Church for not repenting for participating in communion in a different denomination. In all cases the "Pharisees" were convinced that they were right and serving God.

Unfortunately the Pharisee is often only revealed in hindsight, when history proves him wrong. I need to be aware of this and always ask myself: Am I prepared to learn from Jesus, prepared to change my mind or am I not going to budge? I might be very sure ... and wrong!

I hope that the disciple in me can overcome the Pharisee time and again!

2. **The divorced people**

The second group actually does not appear in person in this text. They are spoken about. This is a huge problem, when we discuss people and their issues, but don't interact with them. Fortunately there are various reports where Jesus did interact with divorced people, so that we can at least see how he treated them.

One of these occasions featured in the opening service of Synod: The Samaritan woman at the well, in John 4.

Not only was she divorced. "You had five men, and the one that you have now is not your husband" Jesus says to her. Wow - she had broken every conceivable commandment concerning marriage. No wonder that she chose the well outside of town. No wonder that she chose to come during the heat of day, when every one else was having their siesta. She was not very popular amongst the women in town and rather avoided them!

How does Jesus treat her? He does not relate the laws. He does not admonish her about her life style. Rather he says: If you knew who I am, you would ask me, and I would give you living water for free - water that will turn you into a fountain of blessing for others!

With his interaction Jesus makes it very clear that God's intention is not to regulate our lives with many rules, but that his intention is for our life to unfold, for us to live!

That is why he says to the Pharisees: Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses has permitted you to write a letter of divorce. *But God's intention was very different.* "It is not good for man to be alone - I will make him a helper, a companion, to be next to him"

God's intention with marriage is not a life time sentence in a prison of commandments, but a fulfilling and fulfilled companionship that will make life better and is protected by commandments.

The woman at the well had a totally messed up life, and was messing up many other lives. Jesus makes it clear: God's intention for you is very different. He wants you to have a fulfilled life, and a life that is a blessing to others - a fountain of living water flowing from you!

Jesus, in all his interactions with those who had messed up, makes it clear: I want you to live! He has this incredible passion to bring life to us!

Now I would like to focus on the third group. They are not inside, they are waiting outside, being kept at a distance by the disciples. Although Mark does not state it like this, I picture Jesus and his disciples leaving the house again, when the following happens:

3. The children

"10: 13 People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' 16 And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them."

The disciples knew (Pharisees in them!) that the children had no place with Jesus. He was busy with important issues, serious discussions, which Children could not understand and were not even interested in. They would only be a nuisance. "Go and play outside" - that is how adults address children when they are dealing with serious issues. "Take them away" the disciples instructed the adults.

"Let them come to me" is Jesus's response. More than that. He is angry at the disciples: "Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" In their eagerness to learn from Jesus they have been missing the point: the deepest passion of Jesus is that wants us to receive his gift of life like little children!

The Pharisee in me knows all the answers and is then blind, not able to see life. The disciple in me yearns to learn and assumes that in what I learn I will come closer to the Lord. Jesus calls to the child in me: the part that does not understand, that does not ask - that just needs a hug, a blessing, and embracing Lord that says: The kingdom belongs to you! Life does not start in my understanding, but in my being accepted, embraced, hugged by the Lord!

As grandfather I know how wonderful it is when my grandchild jumps into my arms and hugs me. He does it regardless of whether I am in shorts in my garden, or while I am wearing a suit, doing my work as bishop. "Opa!" he shouts, and he hugs me!

We have other reports of meetings with Jesus and little Children. I would like to refer to some where the little Children were not that little.

One is related in John 3, where the little child is a high ranking Pharisee. Nicodemus, knowing what his friends believe about Jesus, wants to meet the Lord himself. Under the shield of darkness he comes to Jesus - and Jesus embraces him, overwhelms him and shows him life!

The next one we find in Luke 7. Jesus is in the house of Pharisees with his disciples. Without permission and ignoring all protocol a prostitute creeps up from behind and cries at the feet of Jesus. Every body is in uproar.

But Jesus looks at her: "Your sins are forgiven, your faith has saved you - go in peace" - receiving the kingdom like a child! Jesus embraces her with his love and forgiveness and grants her life!

The last instance is perhaps the most impressive one. Jesus is hanging on the cross - exhausted after a night of torture, the long struggle up to Golgotha. He is in extreme pain, hands and feet nailed to the cross, battling to breathe.

Next to him hangs a hardened criminal. His life has been wasted, all opportunities thrown away. "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom" he says. And there, on the cross, without being able to move, hardly able to speak, Jesus embraces him without being able to embrace him. He takes him in his arms, without being able to hold him, he blesses him, without being able to place his hands on him and says: Today you will be with me in my kingdom"

We read in Genesis 1: God spoke, and it was. When Jesus speaks to the criminal, it is more than words. He pronounces life ... and it is! "I live, and you too shall live"

Do you see this passion of Jesus for life? We want to divide, decide, rule on who is worthy and who not, what is good and what not. But Jesus has this incredible passion to lead all of us to life!

He wants to embrace the Pharisee in me and show me the way to life. He wants to embrace the eager and dedicated disciple in me and share with me his passion for all people. He wants to embrace the child in me, that of which I and others might say: God has no time for this! He wants to hold me, hug me, bless me. And blessing does not mean that he wishes me well. He speaks - and it is!

"Diversity in Unity" was our synod topic. This is the Lord of the Church, the Lord in which our Unity lies: Jesus Christ. And this Jesus Christ passionately wants us to discover the fullness and diversity of the life that he offers.

The Pharisee in me has fixed ideas and knows who and what belongs and who and what not. May the Pharisee become a disciple who is willing to learn, be challenged and start sharing in the passion of Christ for life and diversity. And may the disciple in me become a child, even if only for a brief moment, to be hugged, to receive life which goes beyond understanding! And then, may I look around me and see all the other children that the Lord is embracing, hugging, holding, blessing. Little children of all walks of life and all age groups!

Amen

Horst Müller, Bishop, ELCSA(N-T) Email: hmuller@elcsant.org.za