

Mark 10:2–16

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 2 October 2012

One of the most important questions in dealing with the texts for Pentecost 19 is this: Who is speaking in your sermon? Who is the preacher? If, having arrived at an interpretation of these texts, a person were to proceed on the assumption that he or she is the preacher, there would almost invariably be trouble. These texts stand over against the most common assumptions of our culture, even against assumptions the church held until quite recently, and they drag us into the middle of a cultural conflict that is yet to be completed.

Marriage is in the process of being redefined by a culture that believes the goal of human life is the mastery of human and non-human nature, as a great Canadian observer once said. And so the primary goal of the culture is detachment: the freedom to pick up and leave, particularly in the defining relationships of life. Consequently, a pastor who stands alone as an interpreter against this prevailing cultural assumption is asking to be mowed down right off the bat. So the most likely reaction, given the usual assumption of preachers, is fear. Why take the chance?

It is also possible to answer the question “Who’s the preacher?” ideologically. There are two competing camps in this cultural warfare. One has a romantic view of the past and seeks to impose structure on a situation that appears to be out of hand. So, in the style of the contemporary social evangelists, they argue for a structure in the family that is top-down: Papa Bear on top, Mama Bear underneath, the children below, with order handed out. In the face of that, of course, there are those who ideologically regard the family as merely a social convention, with no structure whatsoever, something that can be defined and redefined according to current standards of sexual behavior. So there are no givens. Both of these ideologies run smack-dab into Jesus, who in this text is remarkably strict on the one hand and remarkably gentle on the other. He radicalizes the law and he radicalizes the gospel. So we have those two words slapped up against one another, as usual in the text, and it is a word on which both ideologies founder.

So let me propose a different answer to the question. Who is the preacher? Who is preaching in this text? It is very simple, and for just that reason a radical answer: Jesus is the preacher. Big surprise. Jesus is finally the one speaking, not only in the text but in your sermon. That makes all the difference, because Jesus is the one who spoke in the absolution earlier in the service. Hopefully you are following the liturgy closely enough that you speak the absolution faithfully Sunday after Sunday. If you are, you are speaking to forgiven sinners. Christ Jesus is speaking to forgiven sinners. Christ Jesus, the one who said, “Your sin is forgiven,” is now the one who turns to enter our marriages, to enter the most definitive and challenging relationships of everyday life, and to enter them in such a way as to be helpful.

That means he is going to be tough on us. He is going to take on our assumptions and squeeze them tight. But on the other hand, he is never going to compromise the absolution: “Neither do I condemn you.” If you have been divorced, if you have remarried, if you are facing the inevitable tensions of married life, this word is the definitive and last word. “Neither do I condemn you.” And with that, “Go, and sin no more.” Because of course it is right here, in our marriages, in our families, in the definitive relationships of life, that the cross is borne.

So I won’t ever preach on this text without the absolution. I have preached on it maybe thirty or thirty-five times, and every time I make sure the absolution is there at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, because once this word gets loose you can just see people dying in the pew, and you want to uphold them and strengthen them. With these words Jesus’ intent is not to destroy, but to heal and to free in this defining relationship.

Hebrews 2: Lest We Drift Away

So with that we are going to work our way through the texts. We’ll start with Hebrews. We’re finally done with James, thank goodness, though I just loved that text last week. I thought that was a lot of fun. My pastor had worked into the Greek even more closely than I had, and we had a wonderful discussion of anointing, rubbing with oil. I’m looking forward to coming back to that again sometime in the lectionary.

But now we move to Hebrews. Hebrews is not Ephesians, of course, but it sure has more theological content than James, so we’re going to have a good time with it. Sometimes I wonder about this practice of continuous readings from one epistle that may or may not correlate with the other texts. This Sunday, the nineteenth, the other three texts correlate very closely, but Hebrews stands alone, so we’ll have to begin with Hebrews. Then we’ll take

Genesis 2 and Psalm 128 together, and from there, hopping, skipping, and jumping, we'll move on to the gospel text, which I want to encourage you in the strongest way to preach.

This has been the failure of our church: as marriage has been redefined by the culture, we have allowed the culture to redefine us, and we haven't had the courage or the love to stand with people in public and talk about what the shape of marriage really looks like. But with Jesus holding you up under the shoulders and putting words in your mouth, I think we can undertake this discussion. Certainly I wouldn't want to proceed into it without him doing exactly that for me, holy smokes. The world dies on the voice of man, on his proclamations and his wishful thinking, and if that's all we've got, good luck.

So we'll go to Hebrews. This is quite an interesting text. As you know, the Greek is quite different here and reflects a more genuinely Hebrew community. It is more Jewish, so to speak, than any of the other epistles, and it is concerned particularly with the problem of those falling away. As we know, the early community was enthusiastic in the theological sense. It had been brought to the edge of its seat by the fall of Jerusalem. It was expecting Christ Jesus' imminent return, and that imminence kept a forward lean in everybody for a long time. But as time wore on, the lean started to settle, and as it settled, people started leaving the community in disappointment.

So Hebrews is particularly concerned about this leaving, and it begins with a warning to pay attention. This is Hebrews 2:1–13, and in the first four verses the members of the community are being called to attention. "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." That is exactly the concern, and the attempt is to revive a community that has come down.

As we know, this is the hardest work. Lots of pastors, going into a new community, look at the inactive list, figuring that the inactives will be the easiest to get to and the fastest to come back to church. In fact, when you've been around a while, you know that the inactives are the very hardest. They have fallen away for a reason. So the author of Hebrews is taking this problem on like a faithful pastor seeking to revive his congregation, seeking to bring them back, to bring their attention back to the Word.

So having called for attention, in the next verses he speaks of the debasement of Jesus, his humiliation and his exaltation. Having been debased, he has been exalted, and because he has been exalted, he is in a position to help us. He understands both sides, the debasement and the

exaltation. You can have a lot of fun with this. In some ways it is parallel to Philippians 2:5–11, which is a little more sophisticated, or plainer. Still, this is a very familiar theme, and if you can't bring yourself to preach on the gospel text, Hebrews will do.

Again, I want to encourage you in the strongest way to be helpful to your people. If you read the gospel text and keep silent, they're going to know that something funny is going on in your gut. So the gospel reading will expose you anyway, and you might as well just stand there and take it. I'll stand beside you and help you, at least from far behind.

Genesis 2: Naked and Not Ashamed

So then we come to the combination of Old Testament texts that prepare us for the preaching of the gospel. The first is Genesis 2:18–25. Personally, I always think ideology is the enemy of a preacher. We ought to be under the control of the text, not under the control of the advocates. The church used to be the Republican Party at prayer; now Lutherans have become Democrats at prayer, at least in the ELCA. Either way, the ideology has taken over, and those who disagree are excluded. It shouldn't work that way. We have this in common: we listen to these biblical texts.

So the trick here is not giving credit to the ideologues. I know you can hear them working on the edges of this discussion: gay advocates on one side, Dobson on the other. You can hear their agendas being cranked up: this is sexism, homophobia, and all the rest of it, the great sins invented by advocacy groups to marginalize their opposition. You can hear these charges unfolding. But the text has a life of its own, and so we're going to go right between the ideologues, as if we were running a gauntlet, and take a look at Genesis 2:18–25.

Now, you know there's all kinds of stuff in this text that is going to trigger apprehension and anxiety. The feminists are going to be mad, the gay advocates are going to be mad, and everybody's going to go up, up, up. But just look at the text. What is fascinating about this story as it is told in Genesis is its utter sophistication. Those who believe in the JEDP business, for whatever it is worth, usually attribute this to the Yahwist. How much stock do you want to put in that? I'm never sure. But I always like the texts attributed to the Yahwist, because he is one sophisticated theologian.

And what is incredible about this text is the last words: "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." Some of you remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer's great discussion of this text in his *Ethics*. For my money, it is one of the most profound treatments of this text

I've ever read. To be naked is to be exposed. To be naked is to be unprotected. And to be naked is to start looking for cover, at least among sinners, and that's all of us, of course. "They were naked and were not ashamed." That is, they were exposed to one another fully, unadorned in any way, and they didn't start looking for cover. Why? Because the partnership expressed earlier in the text has materialized between them at the deepest level. Adam and Eve have been brought together at the deepest level of life. They have become so much a part of one another, so caught up in one another, that they are not aware of themselves as separate. They are exposed to one another in an unprotected, open-hearted way. This is the intimacy of married life.

C. S. Lewis has a wonderful comment on marriage in which he speaks of male and female as completing one another. That is certainly the sense here. They were naked, and he didn't ogle her, and she didn't size him up. They are naked, and all they are aware of is the other, the joy of the other. This is the fullest expression of the partnership God intended, and of its tenderness.

You've heard me talk about this before, of course, but I never get over it. We have an old couple in our congregation, Bob and Willie, who come from Florence, Oregon, not far from where I originally served, right down on the coast, a beautiful little community. They are retired here. Willie has Parkinson's disease, and she's starting to stiffen up a little, but Bob tends her. They're in their eighties, married for sixty years, and Bob tends her with a kind of devotion that is just this: they were naked and not ashamed. When you see that, you are seeing the deepest intimacy available in the human community. Those old marriages express exactly what this text tells.

So this is what God is in favor of. This is what God is voting for, what God is commanding, what God is seeking to protect: this intimacy, where Adam and Eve are not simply subordinates, not even simply partners, but are brought together in the deepest companionship available.

Psalm 128: Like Olive Shoots Around Your Table

Now I suppose Psalm 128 might trigger some more. It is written from the male point of view, of course, and you can imagine all kinds of things with it. But again, what is bestowed here is the beauty of this partnership, this sharing, emerging in blessing and confirmed by the children gathered around the table. Of course we can't speak of this text without speaking of

those who do not have the intimacy of married life, and we can't speak of it without acknowledging the childless. But the negative does not control the positive here. The positive is this: children embody that partnership, reflect it to the whole human community, and carry it into the community. So Psalm 128 is an exuberant little blessing of married life.

Psychologists say that the closest companionship in human life is between a parent and an adult child: a child who has come past child-rearing, become an independent adult, and come back for the friendship that sets up. When you turn from the intimacy of married life to the joy of an adult child who is beyond the conflicts and the ordeal of maturation, you get into a level of companionship you can hardly imagine. So this is the sheer goodness of God, and going into the divorce text we can never forget the way the context has been set for us.

What God is protecting is this intimacy. What God is protecting is this tenderness. The reason Jesus is getting tough, as he did last week, is that there is something profoundly gracious at stake, and he wants it preserved. So he gets a little tough on us, just for this purpose. Interestingly, he is not being tough on those who have been divorced. He is not being tough on those who have remarried. When he meets such people, particularly women, in the Gospels, he is very gracious with them. But beforehand he is not going to make any concessions, boy, I'll tell you. He is going to stick with it.

Mark 10: What God Has Joined Together

So we'll go to the gospel, and we'll look at two dimensions of it. I think it was Ernst Fuchs (that's F-U-C-H-S, for those of you whose imaginations just went the wrong way) who talks about how Jesus radicalizes the law and radicalizes the gospel. That's a pretty good way to look at this text, because both things are clearly happening.

"And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'" This is a permanent question in the life of the community, not only the Christian community but the secular community as well. My old teacher Gustaf Wingren used to tell me that in the early years of the Soviet Union, just after the Bolshevik Revolution, they passed one of the most liberal divorce laws on the books, and within ten years they passed one of the most conservative. Because, Wingren said, they saw what divorce was doing to the children, the ultimate victims, whose lives are permanently crossed by the emptiness that develops. Again, that doesn't mean the children of divorce can't thrive. Of course they can. God is good, no

matter what, all the time. But this is the protection. So we get the question in Communist society, in secular society, and in the church as well: Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?

The reason we get this question is that the relationship between a man and a woman is the most complex and demanding relationship in human life. Opposites attract, and in fact there is something fundamentally different about the way the sexes think. When you put them together in the same bed, belly to belly, for a lifetime, conflict erupts, and it usually doesn't take very long. Sometimes it starts right on the honeymoon. Generally it starts before that.

"He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?'" He is going back to the tradition, and he is going to radicalize it. "They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.'" Moses allowed. That's a very interesting way to put it. When we hear these legal questions, you can almost always assume that underneath, the real question is, "How much can I get away with?" This way of phrasing it indicates that's the question here too. Moses allowed: he lowered the standards sufficiently. Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away. It was that simple. A man who found some impropriety in his wife, no matter how small, was entitled in a patriarchal culture, since she was property, to dispose of her, and so to fill the beds and the brothels with divorced women, sexually experienced but with no one to provide for them, condemned to a life of abuse.

"Jesus said to them" (now listen to this) "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment." Because of your hardness of heart. Now, I have met people who have come out of divorce so hard that they can look back on it and say it's the best thing that ever happened to them. But generally people who hang around churches, people who come to the communion rail, who are looking for Jesus and want to hear his word, are tender. Jesus has softened them up, and when people have been softened like this, it is very hard to find one who doesn't look back on a divorce with incredible pain.

This is the reality of divorce. From the midst of the conflict it looks like freedom, but you get out there and discover the pain that accompanies it. I know you have sat, as I have, listening to the divorced rehearse their narrative, a narrative they have rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed, and that you can be sure has been told and repeated in one place after another, whether at a circle meeting or the gym. It's a story that has been told and retold because people have been hurt. They have been hardened to the point where they could break loose, but not to the point where the pain is resolved. So the narrative follows them around like a whipped pup,

to be repeated over and over to anybody who will listen. That narrative is an attempt to deal with something that is unresolved.

And that's the problem with divorce. When you give yourself to a person sexually, you take on that person's whole identity. You take on every lover that person has ever had. Every lover that person has ever had becomes part of your identity, and you wear it as long as you are in that relationship. God has made us for this partnership, and when the partnership breaks, there is breach. This is why Jesus is trying to protect us, you see. He speaks this hard word because he knows what you know, and you know what he knows: you know what follows.

When my mother died, my dear father remarried precipitously. I had already been ordained for three years. I had seen it happen, and I told him what was going to happen. I asked him what he thought about the text prohibiting remarriage to a divorced person. He said, "That's got nothing to do with me." Well, before he died I knew he was having a hell of a time, but he couldn't talk to me about it. When he died, it turned out he had been talking to his old auntie, who had been spilling the beans to her kids, and they all knew what had been going on. In his remarriage he had taken on a woman and her whole crucified family, already broken by a divorce. He had taken on the whole context of her life in such a way that he simply couldn't rest. My cousin told me he had been threatening in his last days to divorce his wife, because he couldn't take it anymore.

You see what happens. I know divorced people who have remarried, and it has worked. But it takes an awful lot of effort, and an even greater amount when there are children involved. So what is Jesus doing? He is working on the basis of what he knows of us. He is not simply being arbitrary here or trying to imprison us in bad marriages. He is trying to protect us from the consequences of our self-assertion, from the old Adam's leavings, from the breach that follows.

And so he goes back to the intimate text out of Genesis: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." They shall be naked without shame, joined in this intimate way. "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." This is as close as we get. The interesting thing is that in Ephesians, and in 1 Peter, this love, this intimacy, is the closest parallel to the gospel, and so of course it is protected with equal care.

“And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.” The disciples have a chance for a private interview, as usual. “And he said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’”

What is this? You have two people who have been joined sexually, joined not only by sharing a bed but by sharing a common life, sharing a checkbook, sharing obligations and responsibilities. When breach enters, when divorce enters, both go away from the previous relationship carrying their experiences with them. And as they carry their experiences with them, inseparably, unable to get away from them, they enter a new relationship with a double loyalty, one to the prior and one to the new. That’s the adultery. And the adultery, the duplicity, the doubleness, prevents them from giving themselves unreservedly to one another. Something is withheld.

Now I know from pastoral experience that things can be done about this. Generally the best thing to be done is in confession and absolution. You can help people hand the first experience over to Christ Jesus, and he will take it upon himself, and in pronouncing the absolution free the couple, free the individual, to enter the relationship on new terms. Where this happens, there is a new possibility. Christ in effect becomes the middleman, the yenta. Christ in effect becomes the agency of the new marriage, and he can make it work.

But generally, when you’ve got two histories, or three or four, there is way too much for the couple to carry. They say, for instance, that blended families take twice as long to achieve the settlement a single family achieves in three or four years. You’ve got all those kids fathered or mothered by somebody else running around your house, creating hostility and conflict with your own kids. Golly, how much trouble do you want? That’s tough. Well, a good pastor can help. A good pastor can help. I have sat with people who had been divorced a couple of times and were carrying three or four histories around, and I have seen Christ Jesus pick up those histories and carry them, to free them to enter the new relationship on new terms. That’s like him, you see. The one who says the hard word is the one who says the soft word.

Let the Children Come to Me

And so Jesus is the final speaker in this text. He ends it with this marvelous little story about the children. “And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them.” What are those blame Cub Scouts doing around here? Good night,

how many kids have we got anyway? Don't you realize we're shooting the moon here? We're going to transcend ourselves. Golly, do we have to put up with the kids too? They never shut up. You can just hear them. So they are rebuking the children. Now what kind of hardness of heart is that? No tenderness at all.

"But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant": ticked off, irritated. "And he said to them, 'Let the children come to me.'" Isn't that fabulous? Don't you just love it? You can't help but love him. There he is with these jerks hung around his neck, and instead of flying off the handle, which I would do, he picks up the children and blesses them. "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." There it is, in the tenderness of a child, rejoicing and blessing.

Last night when I came home from teaching my class, Carolyn handed me a letter from my six-year-old granddaughter. I write to each of my grandkids every Sunday night, and she writes back. She has written me two letters now. It's so much fun. The postmistress just loves them, because they're addressed to "Jim," with the J backwards, at our house address. I opened the letter, and it said, "Dear Grandpa Jim, I have a loose tooth. I am so excited." Everything was backwards and spelled wrong, but we could decipher it, of course, and Carolyn and I just went whooping with joy for our little granddaughter and her loose tooth, L-O-O-S. What's better than that?

Well, there has been a lot of crucifixion. We raised her father and went through that tension; we went through tension with one another; we watched him remarry outside the faith; we have seen all kinds of things. But there was the resurrection. That's the tenderness Jesus turns toward a little child, exuberant over a loose tooth, wondering what the tooth fairy will bring. It's too much fun, and it's just exactly that.

"Let the children come to me." He is looking after the kids. He is looking after you. And what he wants for you is the kind of soft-heartedness, the kind of graciousness, that looks past self-assertion to see the other, to rejoice in her, to delight in him, to be together naked and without shame. I don't recommend that with the congregation, but with Mama or Papa, that's fine.

God bless you. I'll be praying for you Sunday morning. I have gone into the pulpit over and over sweating this text, and I know you've got some trouble.

SOURCE

CROSS Talk, a weekly Gospel text study for preachers led by Dr. James A. Nestingen, St. Paul Lutheran Seminary. Recorded 2 October 2012 (about 42 minutes).

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ih-Dfyz6igc>

Edited from the recording for reading.