

WE'RE PLAYING CHECKERS, HE'S PLAYING CHESS

'Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.' Mk 10:9

In today's Gospel reading it says that the Pharisees wanted to test Jesus. On the surface the test was about marriage and divorce. At least that's what the Pharisees wanted the test to be about, because they thought they had all the answers. All of us like being affirmed that we know right from wrong and are on the right side of things. But the Pharisees would soon learn not to 'tug on superman's cape,' when it came to testing Jesus. For Jesus had a knack for flipping tests around and taking them to a new level, humbling the Pharisees-and the Pharisee in each of us-to bow down to see what is truly good and truly righteous. Another way we could say it, is that when it comes to questions of right and wrong, truth and deception, we are always playing checkers, and Jesus is playing chess.

The Pharisees are playing checkers, because they cannot get over their obsession with who is right and who is wrong when it comes to marriage and divorce. They want to pull Jesus into their turf battle, putting him on the spot by asking, 'is it lawful to grant a divorce.' If Jesus says it is not lawful to grant a divorce, he would go against the established law of Moses and not allow for extenuating circumstances where divorce might be the lesser of evils. But if he says yes it is lawful to divorce, he would be seen as condoning the dissolution of the sacred family structure.

But where the Pharisees are playing checkers, Jesus is playing chess. He knows that the deeper debate here is not about marriage vs. divorce, it is about God vs. man; who is in charge, who knows best, and who is the ultimate judge. You see according to Mosaic law, it was the priestly class-the Pharisees themselves - who were charged with blessing marriages and-under certain circumstances- permitting divorce. So the real issue here is not whether a marriage or divorce is good or bad, it is who is in a position to judge what is ultimately good or bad.

The answer, of course, is that God alone is in a position to judge marriage, he created it from the beginning and holds the mystery of its significance, as he holds the mystery of all life. 'But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female,' Jesus reminds the Pharisees, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.' So they are no longer two but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

In a word, Pharisees, you are way out of your league in arbitrating marriage and divorce. The mystery of marriage belongs to God, where were you Pharisees when I baked it into creation? Divorce, Pharisees, cannot be granted by you, nor can you abolish it, like any suffering in this world, only I, God, can heal it. Jesus sees right through those Pharisees-and we Pharisees-into our hearts, and the main problem isn't marriage or divorce, The main problem is Adam's problem, the original sin which remains our own. We all want to be our own judge and jury; in matters of marriage, and life in general. 'I decide what is right for my life.' 'I am a decent person, following the rules of right and wrong of my tradition.' 'I may not be perfect, but at least I am not like them.'

No says Jesus. God has brought this all together, you are in no position to judge yourself or anyone else. God was is and will be the judge and jury. But that does mean we aren't called to a special role in this life. In the book of Acts Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere (Acts 1:8)." We throw around this word 'witness' a lot in church circles, but witness captures in a word the main role and purpose of a joyful and fulfilled Christian life. Notice that with the word witness, we are still in the court room. But Jesus doesn't tell us to be the judge, judging other people. He doesn't tell us to be the attorney, arguing the case. He wants us to be witnesses. And what does a witness do? A witness merely says, "Here's what I've seen. Here's what I heard." A witness just tells other people the story of what God has done in their life.

That's why even good and bad are subject to a higher calling, and why Jesus worked much more with 'sinners' than with respectable, righteous people. Because the witness of a sinner, is so much more powerful than the witness of someone

who feels themselves righteous. The witness of a sinner is most powerful, because it is most true. 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,' says Paul.

So whether you are married or divorced, gay or straight, black, white or yellow, no one who walks this earth is in a position to be judge over you or you over another. Judgement is for God alone. But each of you, and each of us is called to take whatever we have, whatever we have done, for good or bad, and use it to witness to the greatest story ever told. This is the ongoing love story between God and his creation, between God and each of his beloved sons and daughters, which no person, no law, no evil can come between. "For what God has joined together, let not man put asunder," now and always; amen.