

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
October 7, 2012  
Pentecost 19  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 2:18-24  
Psalm 128  
Hebrews 2:1-4  
Mark 10:1-9

I want to preach this morning from the Gospel lesson, where the Pharisees come to Jesus and question him about divorce. But I'm going to get to that Gospel text by way of the Ten Commandments. So please bear with me.

The Ten Commandments are like "fence posts" that form the boundaries of our life together as God's people. Staying within those boundaries will result in the most fulfilling life possible. Transgressing those boundaries can result in the fragmentation of our common life together, and sometimes cause irreparable breaks in our relationships.

In other words, the Ten Commandments are not God's way of being mean or restricting our freedom. The Commandments are designed for our good. They reflect the best plan of the Creator for his creatures. They are woven into the fabric of creation such that to follow them leads to peace, happiness, and blessing.

Conversely, when we violate or "break" one of the Commandments, we don't break the commandment as much as we "break" ourselves *on* the commandment.

Let's take an example from the law of physics. Suppose I decide today that I no longer like the law of gravity. Suppose I further decide that I am going to defy the law of gravity. Tomorrow morning I am going to climb up to the roof of the US Bank building in downtown Boise, and I will say, "this law of gravity is bunk. It handcuffs my freedom. It limits my choices. Therefore, I'm going to break free and defy this law."

With that, I jump from the roof and enjoy the nice ride down as I break the law of gravity. Minutes later, people come and scrape my body off the pavement with a spatula.

Now, in one sense it appears that I defied and broke the law of gravity. But in reality *I broke myself* on the law of gravity. That law was an immutable principle, and I violated it to my own harm and destruction.

The Ten Commandments are God's moral laws, and they are as immutable as the law of gravity. They are fence posts which frame for us the boundaries of healthy relationships, both with God and with one another. To break them is not so much to inflict pain upon God (although that happens!), but to inflict pain on ourselves.

Now come with me to today's Gospel lesson.

Jesus and his disciples are continuing their journey to Jerusalem, and Jesus continues to teach his disciples and the crowds about the meaning of discipleship.

On the way, they are accosted by the Pharisees, who want to “trick” Jesus. The issue they use is divorce.

The Old Testament law allowed for divorce (Deut. 24), and so by framing their question to Jesus in the way that they do, the Pharisees are attempting to put Jesus into conflict with Moses and the Old Testament law.

The way they frame the question reminds me of the way a question might be posed to a politician at a debate: “So, Jesus, what is your policy on divorce? Do you support a pro-divorce position, as Moses did?”

Jesus’ response here is masterful, not merely in its strategy, but also in its truth and compassion.

Jesus shifts the focus here from what the Old Testament law *allows* (Deut. 24:1-4) to what God *intends*. The Old Testament law was, says Jesus, a concession to human sin and weakness. It reflects life *outside* of the boundaries of the fence posts.

But back inside the fence posts you’ll find God’s plan from the very beginning. A man shall leave his father and mother, and a woman shall leave her father and mother, and the two shall become one. Within this relationship persons find God’s highest and best plan for their lives.

The subject of this Gospel text then is not divorce, but marriage. To the Pharisees’ question, “are you pro-divorce?” Jesus responds, “I am pro-marriage,

because that has been God's plan from the beginning. Marriage, not divorce, best expresses God's will. And God's best intent is not negated or superseded by legal permissions."

Marriage, then, becomes another "fence post" in the sense that it reflects God's best intention from the beginning.

But this places us in a quandary, because the fact of the matter is that the boundary of this fence post is being assaulted in our society with great force. In a "me-first" society, marriage represents a "we-first" relationship that is not popular. And tragically, divorce rates within the church are now keeping pace with those outside the church, statistically speaking.

In view of this, how does the church seek to honor God's plan for marriage while at the same time attempting to minister to the brokenness in her midst?

Let me offer some suggestions.

Jesus, it seems to me, affirmed God's plan for the marriage relationship, without relegating to second class status those for whom that relationship had not gone according to plan. Jesus did not hold peoples' past over their heads when he forgave them. Neither should we.

Let's consider the Commandments again. When I was a young boy, I stole a package of cigarettes from the local grocery store. I stepped outside the

boundaries where God's clear fence posts were, and I violated one of the Commandments.

God forgave me of that sin, and does not hold it over my head. He does not hold it against me. Hopefully, neither will all of you.

Many years ago when I went before the boards of ministry to become a licensed minister, they did not say to me, "we see from your records that in 1975 you stole a pack of cigarettes from the Safeway store in Superior, Nebraska, and that disqualifies you from becoming a minister."

They didn't say that. What they wanted to know was whether I had been forgiven of my past sins, and was living my present life to the glory of God.

My prayer would be that Epworth Chapel on the Green would be a place where we honor and embody the sanctity and beauty of the marriage relationship. Where we experience the blessings of living within the "fence posts" of God's design.

But I also pray that we would be a congregation that is equally loving and compassionate toward those for whom this relationship has not gone according to plan. I pray that we would be a fellowship where healing and forgiving grace could be offered and received. A place where if God doesn't hold peoples' past sins against them, neither will we.

As you come to the Lord's table this morning, come with gratitude for the fence posts God has given us to guide our relationships with God and with one another. And come with gratitude that when we move beyond those fence posts, Jesus comes looking for us, extending his hand of mercy and compassion, in order to bring us back home.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.