

“It’s the Least You Can Do”  
Mark 10:2-16  
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Things are not always as they seem. Icebergs are really much bigger than they appear. I am actually a lot older than I look. And tonight’s passage from Mark is not about divorce. The Pharisees may wish to try to make it about divorce, but Jesus has something much more important to talk about. You see, Jesus is not interested in the question of divorce. No, he is interested in the question of marriage, or more specifically, relationships, and what characterizes good, positive, kingdom-affirming relationships. We know this because we see Jesus changing the subject from the Pharisees’ concern with justifying their divorces, or commenting on Herod’s, to his own concern for the relationships God gives us.

We are told that the Pharisees wished to “test” Jesus with their question about divorce, but more likely they were trying to lay a trap for him. You will remember that it was John the Baptist’s criticism of King Herod’s marital status that led him to an unfortunate end on a silver platter. And if you remember that story carefully, you will remember that, in fact, John did not criticize Herod’s divorce, but rather his remarriage to his brother’s ex-wife, “For John had been telling Herod, ‘It is not lawful to for you to marry your brother’s wife.’” And they may have been hoping that by seeking from Jesus the same response to Herod’s actions, they might secure the same end for Jesus. But as usual, Jesus is too clever,

and they end up walking away scratching their heads and looking foolish.

Interestingly enough, however, in the privacy of a conversation with his disciples, Jesus does indeed arrive at the same conclusion as John when he says, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” And so in this last statement of Jesus, we have our clue that although Jesus may not have been thrilled about divorce, that is not his highest concern. The end of a contract is not the problem. The brokenness of a relationship is.

We human beings have never been very good at keeping their promises, a fact Jesus observes when he reminds the Pharisees that the reason they can even talk about divorce is because of God’s mercy on their commitment-challenged lives. “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses wrote this commandment for you,” the commandment that a man could, for a variety of frankly very petty reasons, give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her on her merry way. Moses didn’t write anything God didn’t sign off on, and so, Jesus never actually denies the legality of divorce, even while he recognizes its human heartbreak. What he does deny, however, is the possibility of taking advantage of a hardened heart to betray the intention of God for the relationship in the first place. Go ahead and divorce if you wish, he is basically saying, but don’t think you can have it both ways. Marriage is a one and done, and all divorce leaves you with is a future alone,

if you would avoid sin. You may be able to break your contract, but you cannot break apart a relationship that God has joined together.

I am not interested tonight in the question of whether those Christians we know and love who have divorced and remarried are committing adultery. Indeed, if you ask me that question, I will pull a Jesus on you and change the subject to a more important one, namely the point at which Jesus was driving in this encounter with the Pharisees, that in relationships of all kinds, it is the condition of our hardened hearts that leads us to do our least when God calls to do our utmost, and to take the low road when the high road leads to heavenly places. We are called, he is saying, to a higher standard than what we can simply get away with. We are called, he is saying, to honor the relationships God has given us, and to give honor to the one who has given us those relationships, even when no one is watching or will hold us accountable. That's why he calls on the memory of the garden, of the gift of us, one to another, and places an incomparable value on the treasuring of that gift.

Maybe you've heard the saying, "It's the least I can do." When we say that, we are generally replying to someone's expression of gratitude. For example, you return a favor someone has done you with a nice gift, say a card and some flowers, and when you are thanked, you say, "Not at all. It's the least I can do," meaning that although your debt is really so much larger than the value of your gift, at least it moves in the direction of an appropriate reciprocation, and you and the recipient

of your gift both feel as though you have maintained or even enhanced your relationship. In this kind of social exchange, the least we can do is plenty, but alas, that kind of social exchange is not where we spend most of our time. Most of our lives are spent in relationships with the kind of interactions in which the least we can do is at best an insult to our relationship, and at worst a sin. You see, so often, we really only offer “the least we can do,” the very least, the minimum, what we can get away with, just enough, when we are called to give so much more, to invest ourselves in others as Christ has invested himself in us.

Last week, we secured our son Julian’s US citizenship through the process of obtaining a certificate of consular report of birth abroad. As a result, if I were to die today, I would have left Julian something quite valuable in today’s society: his blue passport. I might also be able to leave him a very small inheritance, both things which might help him greatly to grow up to lead his life. If I were to die today, heaven forbid, not only would that be all I could leave him, but it would, in a very real sense, be enough, enough because that is all I really could leave him: a mostly unsullied name, a few dollars, and US citizenship. But will that be enough if I *don’t* die tomorrow, or the next day?

You see, what I would leave him today would be the least I could do, but I have a long time (hopefully) to do more than just the least. If I can avoid the kind of hardness of heart Jesus noted in the Pharisees, I just might have a chance to leave him something more: wonderful memories, a knowledge that he was loved

by his earthly and his heavenly fathers, a model for him to follow of how a husband and wife should love one another. I could do the minimum and leave him to his mother's care, or a nanny's care, and live my life without much concern for him, as far too many fathers have done. I could even divorce his mother and pay his child support and consider my contact fulfilled, but I would be shortchanging his relationship with me, a relationship God has given both him and me. Heaven forbid, I should only do with him the least I could do.

I think I have in the past shared with you the work of author Lewis Hyde whose book, "The Gift," is an absolute must-read. Hyde's book takes a look at how something intangible like art, or even the creative spirit itself, can be transformed from a gift of beauty to the world into a saleable commodity to be hoarded and stripped of its power. He describes this process of commoditization as one in which the gift slows down and stops moving, and he uses stories and traditions from many cultures to show that it is the continuous passing of the gift from one member of the community to another that builds up a community, and that when someone stops the gift from moving, when they privatize it by keeping it for themselves, the gift stops moving, and great damage is done, both to the creator of the gift, and the community for which it was intended. If that sounds a little abstract, let me give you a couple of brief examples. The first took place just last Sunday as a matter of fact in this very place during our prayer time when two people asked for prayers of thanksgiving for something they had witnessed, the

double rainbow over San José, and the concerts presented by the National Symphony. Perhaps mundane on the surface, these prayer requests are actually a beautiful way of keeping the gift moving, of staying connected in relationship, rather than privatizing or hoarding it. The seekers of prayers for these glories of God could easily have sewn up the experience in their hearts, and forgotten God's role in it all, and stopped the gifts in their tracks. But I, for one, am grateful for the opportunity to share in their joy, and so the gift moves on.

The other example I would share occurred just when I was reading Lewis Hyde's book for the first time several years ago. Flora and I were on vacation in Costa Rica in Tortuguero, and like good tourists, we paid our fees to see the sea turtles deposit their eggs in the pits they laboriously create each night during the laying season. Have no doubt, it was a remarkable experience, but as I watched the turtle drop more and more of her eggs, I began to feel more and more uncomfortable and more and more like some kind of voyeur. Even if the turtle showed no obvious signs of being distressed by my presence, I had the distinct feeling that I was trespassing on a very private moment, but that even despite my intrusion, the turtle was gifting me with this moment of witnessing the awesome creative power of God. And as I left the beach that night, the point of the book became clear as I realized that I had the choice to either commoditize the gift I had received, by keeping it for myself, or let it remain a gift by passing it on somehow. To tell you the truth, several years later, I have a certain feeling of shame for

having done the least I can do. You see, all I can honestly say I've done to honor that turtle's gift is to tell other people to visit Tortuguero to see it for themselves. I suppose that if I have not violated completely the relationship with that turtle given to me by God it is only because I am telling you about it now. But I certainly haven't done much else to make sure that turtle's, or any other turtle's, gift can be passed on. Perhaps you saw in last week's news, the story of the fisherman who was caught with 18,000 turtle eggs in his garage. I have done the least I could do, and we have all paid the price.

In the Proa section of this morning's La Nación, is an article about the effects of the Guatemalan drought on the poor in that country. More than 500 people have died of hunger, mostly in the countryside, while, no doubt the Pollo Camperos and the McDonald's of Guatemala City are still supersizing the combos they sell. And here we are on World Communion Sunday, about to break bread while celebrating the oneness we are given in Jesus Christ that breaks down any barrier. We celebrate a meal that connects us with every other Christian in mutual responsibility, and on World Communion Sunday, we are reminded of just how vast is that network. But let me suggest something tonight, in the spirit of Jesus' words to the Pharisees and his disciples, that if we settle for simply enjoying this meal and going our merry way, and doing nothing for those who are starving, in Guatemala or anywhere else, if we do the least we can do by divorcing ourselves from their reality, then we will have rent asunder what God has joined together in

Jesus Christ, and we will have truly become the adulterers of whom Jesus speaks. But if we pass on the grace we experience here, if we pass on the bread we break, we will have taken a giant step in both softening our hardened hearts, and filling the empty bellies of those whom God in Jesus Christ has given to us. May God help us to put behind us the least we can do, to strive for the fullness of what God can do in us. Amen.

### **Table Blessing**

To your table  
you bid us come.  
You have set the places,  
you have poured the wine,  
and there is always room,  
you say,  
for one more.

And so we come.  
From the streets  
and from the alleys  
we come.

From the deserts  
and from the hills  
we come.

From the ravages of poverty  
and from the palaces of privilege  
we come.

Running,  
limping,  
carried,  
we come.

We are bloodied with our wars,  
we are wearied with our wounds,  
we carry our dead within us,  
and we reckon with their ghosts.

We hold the seeds of healing,  
we dream of a new creation,  
we know the things  
that make for peace,  
and we struggle to give them wings.

And yet, to your table  
we come.  
Hungering for your bread,  
we come;  
thirsting for your wine,  
we come;  
singing your song  
in every language,  
speaking your name  
in every tongue,  
in conflict and in communion,  
in discord and in desire,  
we come,  
O God of Wisdom,  
we come  
Amen.