

PENTECOST 20B – 10/7/18
Protecting the Most Vulnerable
(Mark 10:2-16)

Have you ever heard of David Phillips? Well, neither had I... until yesterday, that is. And his story is really quite amazing! Even more than that, it reaffirms the old adage that it pays to read the fine print.

Because back in the spring of 1999, you see, he happened to be pushing his shopping cart down the frozen-food aisle of his local supermarket when a promotion on a Healthy Choice frozen entrée caught his eye. It indicated that anyone who sent in 10 barcodes from Healthy Choice products, including those frozen dinners, would get 1,000 frequent flyer miles in return. “I started doing the math,” he said, “and I realized that this was a great deal.”

Now frozen entrees were about \$2.00 apiece back then, but just a few aisles away he found cans of Healthy Choice *soup* at 90 cents each. So he filled his cart with them and then headed over to his local Grocery Outlet, a warehouse-style discount store. And there he hit the mother lode. “They had individual servings of chocolate pudding for 25 cents apiece,” he said. And, of course, each serving of pudding had its *own* bar code as well!

Needless to say, Phillips cleaned the store out – bought every last cup of pudding in the warehouse. Not stopping there, he then asked the manager for the addresses of all the *other* Grocery Outlet stores in the Central Valley of California where he lived. And then, with his mother-in-law riding shotgun in his van, he spent the entire weekend scouring

the shelves of every store from Davis to Fresno. “There were 10 stores in all,” he said, “and luckily most of them were right off the freeway.”

Soon he had filled his entire garage from floor to rafters with chocolate pudding, and even stacked additional cases in his living room. But Phillips still wasn't finished yet. He had the manager of that local Grocery Outlet order him 60 *more* cases. So, a few days later, he went out behind the store, and there were two whole *pallets* of chocolate pudding just waiting there for him. In the end, he purchased 12,150 individual servings of Healthy Choice pudding. (Do the math, at 25 cents apiece, that came to an investment of a little over \$3,000.)

There was just one problem, however. The deadline for earning those frequent flyer miles was rapidly approaching. So then, in a stroke of pure genius, he trucked the pudding over to two local food banks and the Salvation Army who all agreed to tear off the bar codes in exchange for the food donation. Oh, and by the way, he also got an \$815.00 tax right off for the donation. (Which brought that financial investment down to about *twenty-two* hundred dollars.)

And with this help, Phillips managed to get his bar codes in the mail just in time to meet the deadline. And then he held his breath. Now, again, the promotion said specifically that he could get the miles for *any* Healthy Choice product; an oversight on their part, perhaps; something of a loophole, you might even say. And for that reason, Phillips felt that there was probably a pretty good chance that they'd get him on some sort of technicality. But, nope, the company honored their promotion. Although I'm sure that they never thought anyone would ever take it to this extreme, however!

Long story short, large packages soon started arriving in the mail from Healthy Choice. In all, they contained some 2,506 certificates, each one good for 500 miles. Added up, that amounted to 1.25 *million* miles. All for a total investment of about twenty-two hundred bucks – plus the postage, of course! Not too shabby, right?

Moreover, by surpassing the million-mile mark, Phillips now has Advantage Gold status *for life* entitling him to a special reservations number, priority boarding, upgrades, and bonus miles.

Again, talk about exploiting a loophole!

Loopholes... It is said that, just before the death of comedian W.C. Fields – an avowed atheist, by the way – a friend came to visit him in the hospital. And when this friend got there, he was surprised to find the avowed atheist thumbing through the Bible. So the friend couldn't help but ask the comedian what he was doing. And W.C. Fields is reported to have replied, "Looking for loopholes. Looking for loopholes."

Well, W.C. Fields wasn't the *only* one to look for loopholes in the Bible; the only one to ever read the fine print to see how they could use something to their advantage just like that David Phillips, who – by the way – forever became known thereafter at the "Pudding Man."

No, there was actually one particular group in scripture rather *famous* for looking for loopholes, wasn't there? And it was the Pharisees. Now, having said that, and to be fair, the Pharisees clearly wanted to do what was right (you've got to give them credit for at least *that much*); which is what led to their becoming experts in the Jewish law in the first place.

But the problem, and the temptation, of becoming so focused on the law – even if it was for a legitimate reason – is that it can also lead you to become, in a sense, *legalistic*; that is, intent upon finding exceptions and loopholes that could work to your advantage.

One of the most famous examples of this occurs in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke. As you may recall, a lawyer stood up to (quote, unquote) “test” Jesus. He asked Jesus, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responded, “Well, what is written in the law?” And the lawyer answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind... and, oh yeah, your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus said, “You’ve got it... Do this and you will live.”

But here’s where the true motivation of the lawyer is revealed. As Luke tells us, the lawyer “wanting to *justify* himself” then asked Jesus, “And who *is* my neighbor?” In other words, what does the fine print say? Are there any loopholes I could use to somehow narrow the definition of neighbor that I can then use to my advantage; such as limiting my obligations to certain other individuals?

And, of course, there weren’t. Moreover, Jesus clearly saw what the lawyer was trying to do here, and how he was testing Jesus. So Jesus then told him the story of the Good Samaritan, which basically turned the lawyer’s question upside down – as Jesus was often inclined to do – and reminded the lawyer that our neighbor is anyone to whom we can *be* a neighbor; that is, anyone we can possibly help and serve in their time of need...

All of which, then, leads us to this morning's reading where some Pharisees also came to (quote, unquote) *test* Jesus. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" they asked.

Now we have to stop right there for just a moment and recognize something very important. You see, this question was not really about divorce – at least as a practical matter, if you will – *at all*. In other words, they already knew the answer and it was "Yes" it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife.

And in this case, Mark – just like Luke – points out that this was therefore just a test; nothing more. In other words, they weren't interested in any serious discussion or conversation about divorce or its relative merits. No, what they were looking for, and where they were trying to pin Jesus down on, was his take or *interpretation* of the law. What they were probably looking for were some "loopholes" to justify their behavior.

So Jesus, just like in the events leading up to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, also sees right through them immediately, and once again responds with a question of his own. "What did Moses command you?"

And they said, "Well, Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." And where they were going with this was to try and get Jesus to tell them under what *conditions* it was legal for a man to divorce his wife. In other words, they were looking to discover what was in the fine print, so to speak.

You see, at the time, there were basically two main schools of thought. Deuteronomy 24:1 indicated that a man could divorce his wife if he

found something (quote) “objectionable” about her. So apparently one school held that divorce was permissible only in extreme circumstances – such as in the case of adultery. (Not much wiggle room there, to be sure.) While the other school, in sharp contrast, permitted men to divorce their wives for virtually *any* reason at all; like burning his dinner, for instance.

So, again, the test was to try and pin Jesus down; which camp was he in, which school of thought did he personally support? What legal loophole could he perhaps provide for them to exploit?

Also keep in mind here that *another* reason why this was a test is that, *whichever* way he answered, at least half the people were probably going to be mad at and take issue with him. And, therefore, the Pharisees could potentially then use, or even *twist*, his “take” or interpretation of the law to perhaps later entrap him in some way.

In other words, it was a win-win situation for them. Legal justification for making divorce more convenient, on the one hand. And, as a bonus, something they could maybe also use later to entrap or impeach Jesus

But Jesus sees right through them – as always. And, just as in the situation that prompted the telling of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, he immediately turned the tables on *them*...

Ah, but there’s one more point to be made here – a terribly crucial point. Divorce, you see, was only permitted to men. In other words, only the *husband* could write a certificate of divorce; regardless of the reason. Not the wife...

And so Jesus utterly turns the tables on them by reminding them that the legality of divorce is not really the question here. It's not really the issue. You're completely missing the point, he seems to be saying. Let's not talk about the conditions under which divorce is or isn't permissible. Let's focus instead on what the laws regarding marriage and divorce, as well as God's original intention in creation, are *really* all about.

And as David Lose reminds us, the law regarding marriage and divorce – in fact, *all* law, he says – “was and is intended to protect the vulnerable.” He writes, “When a woman was divorced she lost pretty much everything – status, reputation, economic security, *everything* – so how can (the Pharisees) treat this a (matter of) convenience... let alone a debating topic. The law is meant to protect the vulnerable and (the) hurting,” he writes, “and every time we use it for another purpose we are twisting it from the Creator's plan and, indeed, violating it in spirit if not in letter.”

And if we think that the question of divorce is the *real* issue here, then the verses which immediately follow put that thought completely to rest. You see, the scene then quickly shifts to one where people were bringing little children to Jesus, and his disciples tried to stop it and spoke sternly to them, we are told. And when Jesus sees this, he becomes indignant, and says to them. “Let the children come to me; do *not* stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

And here's the thing. Just like women, children also did not have any status or rights of their own in biblical times. “Children,” says NT scholar Donald Juel, “were regarded largely as property, without rights.

They could be sold by their parents. Laws preventing their exploitation were few.

But not for Jesus. Instead Jesus affirms children and elevates their status even *above* that of adults. “Truly, I tell you,” he said, “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” You think children don’t matter? You think children don’t count? Think again, he says.

And in his welcoming and affirmation of children, Jesus once again makes it perfectly clear – *utterly clear* – that God’s law and God’s intention is *always* to protect the most vulnerable among us...

Now here’s where today’s reading really hits home for us in our own time; where it hits us right between the eyes, in fact; kicks us in the teeth even. Because we have to ask ourselves the question, and it’s a very tough question: As a society and, as many like to claim, a supposedly “Christian” nation, how well have we protected the most vulnerable among us; in *particular* women and children?

The latest number I have seen is that 500 children who were separated from their parents after trying to illegally cross the border into the United States have still not yet been reunited with them. In some, if not many, cases the parents have already been deported back to where they came from, rendering these children – some of them very young – temporary and perhaps even permanent orphans. Regardless of your political views or persuasion, as Christ-followers we have to seriously question, *and condemn*, whatever legal loopholes are being exploited to justify such a travesty.

Two more numbers to consider; fractions actually. Eight out of ten women in this country have experienced sexual harassment. And one out of every *three* will experience some form of sexual violence in their lifetime.

From the #MeToo movement to the recent Supreme Court nomination hearings, we have heard the heartbreaking and gut-wrenching accounts of women whose lives have been forever altered, and in many cases irreparably damaged and broken, by sexual violence and assault. And, again, we have to ask ourselves the question: Have we protected the most vulnerable among us?

You see, there *are* no biblical loopholes here; no fine print to exploit. From his welcoming and blessing of children, to his response to those seeking convenient legal justification for divorce, even to his intervention on behalf of the woman caught in adultery who was about to be stoned to death, Jesus made his preference – *God's preference!* – perfectly clear. And it was to always, *always*, and in each and every circumstance, to protect the weakest and most vulnerable; from the widow to the orphan, to the foreigners and outcasts in our midst...

The late Erma Bombeck, the wonderful American humorist and mother – who many of you perhaps remember – once wrote a piece about her favorite child. And what she captured and expressed in that piece also describes, I think, how God looks upon *us* as well.

She wrote, “Every mother has a favorite child. She cannot help it. I have mine – the child for whom I feel a special closeness, with whom I share a love that no one could possibly understand. My favorite child is the one who was too sick to eat ice cream at his birthday party – who

had measles at Christmas – who wore leg braces because he toed in – who had a fever in the middle of the night, the asthma attack, the child in my arms at the emergency ward...

My favorite child is the one who messed up the piano recital, misspelled committee in a spelling bee, ran the wrong way with the football, and had his bike stolen because he was careless...

My favorite child slammed doors in frustration, cried when she didn't think I saw her, withdrew and said she could not talk to me.

My favorite child always needed a haircut, had hair that wouldn't curl, had no date for Saturday night, and a car that cost \$600 to fix. My favorite child was selfish, immature, bad-tempered and self-centered. He was vulnerable, lonely, unsure of what he was doing in the world... and quite wonderful.

All mothers have their favorite child. It is always the one who needs you at the moment. Who needs you for whatever reason – to cling to, to shout at, to hurt, to hug, to flatter, to reverse charges to, to unload on – but mostly just to be there.”

In the very same way, God *also* has a favorite child – *children*, in fact. They're the ones who need God most: the weakest and most vulnerable, the hurting and the exploited, the lost who've almost given up hope of ever being found again. These are God's favorite children; our brothers and sisters. And they should be our favorites as well. What's more we have a calling and an *obligation* – no two ways about it – to strive always, and to the best of our ability, to care for and protect them. Amen.

