19th Sunday after Pentecost

**“Between God’s Will and Human Desire”**

Mark 10:1-12 / October 3, 2021

One day, some Pharisees came to Jesus and tested him. Testing Jesus is kind of their job. What was wrong with them? They did not trust in Jesus but tested him. This time, they tested him by asking about divorce. They asked, **“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” (vs. 2)** Of course, they already knew the answer. They were experts on Moses’ Law. They knew that **“Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send his wife away.” (vs. 4)**

But here we see how wily they were. According to Moses’ Law on divorce, **“a man is permitted to write a certificate of divorce and send his wife away, if he’s discovered something inappropriate about her.” (Deuteronomy 24:1)** But, according to the parallel passage from Matthew, the Pharisees asked, **“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (Matthew 19:3)**

Do you see how willfully they distorted the Law? They wanted to divorce for any and every reason, and they wanted Jesus to justify their desire to do what they wanted to do. What the Pharisees had in their minds was not how they could lead a happy marriage, or how they could manage their broken marriage. What they had in their hearts and minds was a will to do what their desires lead them to do.

Jesus knew what they were thinking. So, he explained them why Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and reminded them of what the original will of God about marriage. By doing so, Jesus was pointing out the mistake the Pharisees made. In other words, Jesus was saying, “You evil Pharisees. Although you teach Moses’ Law and act like you worship God, you actually want to do according to your desires, not according to God’s will. Repent and return to the very basics of your faith.”

Although today’s passage seems like a teaching on marriage and divorce, it is more like a message about what we are required to do between God’s will and human desires. I encourage you not to recklessly judge a person’s marriage failure using just a part of the Bible. Again, today’s passage doesn’t tell the whole truth of marriage and divorce. The focal point of this story is more on a struggle between God’s will and human will, than on whetere divorce is justifiable or blamable.

If you want to get a holistic understanding of marriage and divorce, I recommend you to read the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church. About marriage, it says, “We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman.” (BOD ¶161. C)

About divorce, it also says, “God’s plan is for lifelong, faithful marriage. … However, when a married couple is estranged beyond reconciliation, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, divorce is a regrettable alternative in the midst of brokenness. We grieve over the devastating emotional, spiritual, and economic consequences of divorce for all involved.” (BOD ¶161. D)

To return to the point, the Pharisees liked to justify what they did according to their own human desires under the pretext of the Law. For instance, they liked to keep the Sabbath holy as the Law commands. But they were eager to do so, because they wanted to let people know how holy and devout they were, not because they were thankful to God who grants a blessed rest. Jesus warned them not to follow their desires and urged them to return to the basics of faith, which is the will of God.

As Christians, we are called to do what God wants us to do. Why do we worship God? It is because God wants us to stay in good relationship with Him through worship, not because worshiping God is of much benefit to us. Why do we try to love our neighbors and serve them? It is because that is the will of God for all of us, not because we are proud of ourselves if we do so. Why do we try to rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances? Not because we want to become a saint, but because that is God’s will for us in Christ Jesus, as apostle Paul indicates.

The basic question we need to struggle with at all times is what God wants us to do. As we cannot serve two masters, both God and money, nor can we do things according to both God’s will and our own desires. We should be devoted to the will of God, not to human desires. As apostle Paul encourages us, we should be able to test and approve what God’s will is and obey it, because God’s will for us is always good and perfect. We desire this and that, but we do not know whether they may make us happy or ruin us. On the contrary, if God wants us to have or do certain things, they will certainly give us great joy and happiness.

Then, how can we discern the will of God? It is through praying and meditating on the Word of God. The Bible is the Word of God, not a book that provides scientific or historical information. God reveals His will for us and guides us in the Word of God. There is a way and a right direction of life that we should walk in. Prayer is not just a means of talking to God, but a holy means of listening to what God says to us. God wants us to know His will and His plans for us, so that we may walk through the way of life and truth. We can discern God’s will and plan through prayer.

Do not worry about making mistakes in discerning God’s will. There is a time when our souls are spiritually sensitive enough to discern exactly what God wants us to do. There also is a time when we try hard to discern God’s will, and yet we fail and do not know what to do or where to go. If we truly want to live according to the will of God, it is okay to make mistakes, for God knows our limitations, forgives our mistakes, and even makes our errors into blessings. I believe that, as apostle Paul proclaims, God works all things – even our mistakes and errors – together for good for the ones who love God. (Romans 8:28)

Therefore, everyone, don’t be deceived by human desires. Be diligent and sincere in discerning God’s will. Don’t go ahead of Jesus but follow him. God has revealed His good and perfect will for us in and through Jesus Christ. He is the Way we follow, the Truth we believe, and the Life we hold. Amen.