

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship
Anita Rediger
October 4, 2009

“Why Do You Ask?”
Mark 10

As a child, it was a treat to go fishing with my grandparents. Grandpa and Grandma would go fishing once a week in the summertime. It really was a special treat because as grandchildren we had to take turns. Two of us could go at a time.

I haven't done much fishing since childhood days, but I well remember the pleasant feeling of casting the doll-fly out into the lake and slowly reeling it in – each time hopeful of a bass or a crappie getting hooked on the end of the line. More times than not, however, the hook came back empty or dragging something other than a fish...maybe a piece of seaweed or a soggy tumbleweed. Nonetheless, it was great fun to go fishing!

Fishing...there are many ways and methods. It is also possible to “go fishing” for things other than fish! Things, that is like, information!

Last week we retraced the activities of Jesus and his disciples, joining them on their geographical journey to Jerusalem and more importantly on their unfolding pilgrimage into discipleship. Viewing the accounts of the Gospel as tightly linked vignettes (instead of isolated episodes) opened our eyes to the challenge facing the disciples. Jesus invited them to follow him on “the Way.” Jesus invited them to participate in a new “Way.” Jesus welcomed them into the Way of the Kingdom – through instructional conversations and vivid object lessons. Yet, even as the disciples were drawn to Jesus, they lives continued to be dominated the by the ways empire and conquest - the tension between the hegemonic social strategy of domination and the subversive liberation of the Gospel message was becoming ever greater and greater. The way of empire was all they had every known! Now Jesus!

This morning, our Gospel reading opens with Jesus and his disciples taking leave of Capernaum. “Jesus left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds *again* gathered around him; and as was his custom, he *again* taught them.”

With this introduction we find ourselves holding our breath! Crowds...*again!* Jesus teaching... *again!* We're headed for trouble...we can just feel it coming. Sure enough, the next sentence tells us of the arrival... of the Pharisees. Immediately they ask Jesus a question. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” The Gospel writer doesn't leave us wondering about the sincerity of their question. “Some Pharisees came, and **to test him** they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

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By posing a question, the Pharisees came “fishing” for an answer! A wonderfully descriptive figure of speech! “Fishing” – an underhanded, sneaky way of gathering information which is then used against the unsuspecting “fish!”

The Pharisees arrive – *again* – *with a question*...and they’ve had questions before:

1. Mark 2:15 “And as Jesus sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples...When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”
2. Mark 2:23 “One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”
3. Mark 7:1 “Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is without washing them...So they asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders...?”
4. Now, in Mark 10:2 “Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

A couple of years ago a man came to our front door. Now, remember, I’m from Nebraska and we welcome everyone who comes to the door. However, this man made me feel immediately guarded. He just had that “look!” His first words to me as I opened the door came in the form of a surprising question, “Do you have a dog?” I replied, “Well... yes.” His next question, however, did give me pause, he asked, “What does it look like?” Do I have a dog...and what does it look like? Huh??? All did not seem right with the man or his questions. Thankfully, before blurting out an answer to his question, I found myself saying to him, “**Why do you ask?**”

The Pharisees’ question to Jesus evokes such a response from me – especially in light of the other times when they’ve questioned Jesus. Each time that a question was posed to him - it wasn’t really a question. Instead, the Pharisees’ so-called questions were probing tests to see if Jesus would give the “right” answers! That is...the answer that matched theirs! That’s what I call “going fishing”!

In this morning’s text, the Pharisees ask, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” From between the spoken words, Jesus replies, “Why do you ask?” Jesus senses this is a “loaded” question. So what’s going on here? Are these 14 verses really about divorce

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and remarriage? Should we isolate these few verses and squeeze our experience with the fragility of human relationships into these sentences? Could it be that there is really a much greater question at hand? What do we miss if we read this text only as an instruction manual for divorce and remarriage? Why did the Pharisees' bring this particular question to Jesus? What did they **really** want to know?

Again, let's review the stories which frame this morning's account. The disciples, as we noted last week, had been overheard arguing as they walked to Capernaum... Who among them was the best, the brightest, the best-looking, , had the best singing voice, had the most money, had the nicest family, lived in the biggest house...had the latest lawn mower or the most successful children? Who did Jesus like best? That is...who among them was the greatest!

In response, Jesus sat down before them. By his actions, the disciples immediately realized that he was moving from casual conversation into serious teaching. He said clearly to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Jesus then took a child in his arms.. saying to the anxious, bickering disciples," whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me..." (Mark 9:33ff)

As the scene changes to the arrival of the Pharisees, the image of Jesus with a small child on his lap is still vivid in our mind's eye. Hold on to that image! Jumping ahead, it's striking to note that immediately *following* the prodding of the Pharisees, the Gospel writer widens the focus of the lens. Now, we see more clearly the people of the gathering crowd. From every direction, "people were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might touch them..."

What a contrast! The Pharisees come wearing the outward symbols of power and prestige. No touching allowed! The Pharisees gather around Jesus with a slyly selected, technical question of the Law – not out of a desire for greater understanding – but in order to “test” and trap! The children – they simply come “just as they are” to Jesus. The Pharisees embody life lived under the constrictions of the Law. In contrast, the children – still free from these intricate interpretations of the Law– offer a glimpse of life lived in the expansive space of love. The parents encouraged the little ones to run right up to Jesus and “He took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them and blessed them.” (Mark 10:13) Did anyone ever encourage their children to run up to the Pharisees? They well would have recoiled from such dirty little people!

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“Whoever welcomes such a child in my name welcomes me.” (Mark 9:37) “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” (Mark 10:14) Sandwiched tightly between these two wonderfully, tender invitations to draw near to Jesus...even if you're like a first century Palestinian child (a nobody who doesn't get the Law “right”) is example of a **love-limiting**, **life-limiting** expression of faith. The Pharisees question – a question which *on the surface* seems a question about divorce - is stuck squarely between two accounts describing the way of Jesus as something so very different. The haunting question of “who's the greatest” echoes in the question of the Pharisees... “who's in and who's out?” Jesus demonstrates to his disciples and to the gathering Pharisees – that's not the right question to ask. And if you are asking... “**why do you ask?**”

The man at our door that day wondered if we had a dog...and if we did he wanted me to tell him what it looked like. Why did he ask? I soon found out...with glazed- over eyes he told me that he had just run off the road, hitting our neighbor's mailbox. He said a dog had run out in front of him, causing him to lose control and to veer off of the road.

By now, I had a better sense of things and I began to be the one asking questions... I inquired of him, “Well, what do you think that the dog which ran out in front of you looked like?” The man realized that he didn't have an answer and he turned and left... No, there hadn't been a distracting dog, alcohol was the real hound in this story! His question to me had been a trap!

I believe that we've misused this morning's account if we allow ourselves to focus on the question which the Pharisees **chose** to bring to Jesus. I wonder if the church hasn't allowed itself to “get hooked” by their leading questions instead of listening for the question which Jesus “hears.” This time the Pharisee's question happened to be about divorce – but what really was the point of their questions? Wasn't it to determine “who's good and who isn't?” In contrast, Jesus addresses the larger issue – what is the Good News?? – does it come through the condemning fist of heavy-handed Law or in the healing, hope-filled touch of Jesus? I invite us this morning to look at this text through a fresh lens. This may not be a question about the legalities of divorce at all!

I suggest that this account is a far greater critique about the prestige and power-seeking of the Pharisees than it is a teaching guide about divorce. May we recognize within ourselves, our own Pharisaic desires– no matter the issue. At times, we may have been the ones asking the wrong questions and focusing on the wrong issues -we may not have known any other way. At other times, we may have been the ones pounded by others' demands for conformity to their accepted beliefs –they may not know any other way. As

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our understanding of Jesus' love and grace unfolds before us...may we see today's text through eyes of new possibilities and hope for our future.

May we discover with real delight - the healing embrace of Jesus...the one who welcomed grubby little children just like he welcomes us today – “just as we are!” May this healing and hope flow through us to the world! AMEN