

Sermon October 6, 2024

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

Over the coming weeks leading up to the season of Advent, we will be focusing on the Gospel of Mark. Mark is a very interesting book because it is a story of conflict; particularly the many conflicts between Christ's messages about the kingdom of God and the thinking and practices of the high priests and the Roman occupation. Jesus continually challenges those in authority, and the Gospel of Mark documents how he uses his ministry to bring about change. When we listen to or read Mark carefully, we can come to understand that Jesus is really bringing about a massive change to the history of the people of Israel. He is taking the very daring step of bringing religious beliefs to bear on the social, political, and economic life of the Jewish people. This was a very dangerous because, in doing so, he was challenging not only the power and authority of the high priests, but also challenging the power and the authority of the Roman Empire.

For those of us living in the 21st century, we can also see that Christ's ministry as it is described in Mark was about what we now call *social justice*. At its core, social justice is about the fair treatment of all individuals and social groups within a state or society. It is about the equitable distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society. It is about respecting and protecting human rights. At the point where we join the Gospel story for today from Mark 10, Jesus is shifting his ministry from being based around Galilee to moving more into Israelite territory. From this point until his crucifixion, Jesus is focusing on teaching. Specifically, he is challenging the ideas of the high priests and what has become social and economic norms in the Jewish community. At the start of the passage, we find the Pharisees coming to test Jesus, to trap him into sharing answers or ideas that will undermine his ministry. They are effectively trying to get Jesus to discredit himself so that they do not have to spend time or energy doing it themselves. They begin by asking Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Jesus responds by referring them to the 10 Commandments; specifically to the commandment on adultery. The Pharisees note that Moses had written that it was lawful for a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to

divorce his wife. Jesus counters their point by calling them out on their belief that it is only a man's prerogative to procure a divorce, with their focus on men being the head of any marriage. He goes on to say that God created men and women as equals in a marriage, as it was described in the book of Genesis and in the creation story. What Jesus is saying is that a marriage can be legally dissolved according to the law of Moses by either the husband or the wife, but that remarriage by either partner constitutes adultery; including men who remarry. This would not be a popular idea with the Pharisees who were exclusively a male club and who preferred not to think of women as having any human rights.

As we go deeper into the passage from Mark 10, we hear about the crowds bringing their children to Jesus so that he might touch them and bless them. The disciples, who believed at that point that a major part of their role was crowd control, start speaking quite sternly to the parents of these children and telling them to go away. The disciples are very much caught up in the social norm that children are to be seen as the lowest members of society. Certainly children were not thought to have any human rights in Jewish culture. But Jesus tells them that they are wrong; that children have an innocence and an openness of heart that makes them much more free to receiving the kingdom of God. We would have to think that this must have been quite a shocking moment for both the disciples and for the parents of these children. And we can only imagine what it must have been like for those children who were hugged and held and blessed by the Son of God on that day. What were their lives like after that encounter? How much more did they value their own children when they eventually became parents?

In the weeks ahead, we will hear many more stories from Mark about Jesus and his message about social justice. Next week we will hear more about the issue of wealth and Christ's objection to the unequal distribution of wealth and how that unnecessarily creates hardships for many.

When I started reviewing the stewardship pledge forms that many of you filled out and sent in, I was very interested to notice that we have a lot of ministries in action throughout ACPC that are focused on bringing about social justice in a way that is very

much in line with Christ's ministry that we hear about in the Gospel of Mark. For example, supporting the Food Bank and the Opportunity Shop help us to share our relative wealth with those in our community who struggle to feed themselves or their families and to have access to clothing and other goods that help them to have a renewed sense of dignity. Our membership and participation in the Pictou County Council of Churches allows us to support initiatives like the Helpline for those in crisis and the fuel fund for those who struggle with the high cost of having a warm and safe home. We have several ongoing ministry initiatives aimed at providing comfort and care for palliative care patients and their families, including the snack donation program, and the gifts of handmade pillowcases, prayer shawls and comfort blankets. At the moment, we also directly support the work of the PWRDF with sewing kits. School supplies were again donated to children in Stellarton this past fall and we know that there will be a need again this coming winter to give hats, mitts, and socks to help keep these same children warm. Pastoral care is happening throughout ACPC, including services at our local nursing homes, newsletters and emails being forwarded to those who don't have access to that information, home communions, and visits with those who are struggling with health issues. And, from time to time, we are able to actively support the work of Viola's Place by providing nutritious meals. All of these activities are responses to Christ's call to us to care for those in our society who may be marginalized because of poverty, hunger, social status, loneliness or who may be experiencing illness. When we use our time and energies to help meet the needs of those who are marginalized or forgotten by society, we are the hands and feet of Christ working to bring about a kind social justice that is more in line with God's vision of the kingdom here on Earth. This is important work that we must continue if we are to help create a world where there is a more equitable distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges.

In closing, I would share with you a prayer that I found on the Social Justice Resource Centre website because I think that it speaks to the Gospel message of today and that of the weeks ahead. *God, you have given all peoples one common origin. It is your will that they be gathered together as one family in yourself. Fill the hearts of mankind with the fire of your love and with the desire to ensure justice for all. By sharing*

the good things you give us, may we secure an equality for all our brothers and sisters throughout the world. May there be an end to division, strife and war. May there be a dawning of a truly human society built on love and peace. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.