

October 8, 2006 – Mark 10:1-13

by Douglas Harding

## "Safe Sanctuaries, Part 2"

Thursday I attended the workshop Building Healthy Ministerial Relationships. All Iowa United Methodist Clergy were required to attend. Sponsored by our Clergy Ethics committee it followed a workshop held several years ago which addressed some of the issues I addressed last Sunday, sexual abuse in the church. Last Thursday we spoke about the influence clergy have on people, the power that comes with our role in the lives of others. We learned how important it is that we understand the power we have and how easy it is to abuse that power.

Last week I spoke about children and youth and how important it is that they feel safe in our church, our sanctuary. Today I want to speak again about Safe Sanctuaries, but lets take a different twist.

Early in my career I was sent to a small rural church. One of my first weeks there one of the ladies asked me if I hugged people. Her question caught a little off guard. In school I had encountered people who were not always receptive to physical contact such as hug. So I was cautious as I tried to respond to the question. Now I had learned to give and receive hugs, I enjoyed it. Especially in the context of the church and Christian faith, where I was reminded of Paul's admonition to "greet one another with a Holy Kiss". The practice of the Holy Kiss eventually lead to abuse in the early church and was dropped from worship. During the time I was growing up there was a movement to bring the Holy Kiss back into the worship live of the church, but not as a kiss. Rather a warm handshake or a hug was deemed the more appropriate method of "greeting one another" in the spirit of Paul.

So in short, YES! I was a hugger. But this lady's question, as I said, made me cautious. So I asked why and I heard a story. It seems the previous pastor's husband, a retired pastor, insisted on hugging all the ladies as they left church each Sunday. It was a simple building with only one exit, so you had to walk right by him as you left worship. And some of the ladies were just very uncomfortable getting a hug from him. They did not like it and they were not about to hug him back. But every Sunday, there he was, standing next to his wife, their pastor, at the only exit out of the church. And so I was asked, as their new pastor, that all important question, do I hug.

Well I quickly saw the abuse of power and position that had taken place, and realized that people in that church were not going to be comfortable with a pastor who hugged. I quickly changed my ways.

Now don't get me wrong I am more than willing to hug someone. In fact I enjoy a good hug from time to time. Sometimes a hug is needed. But I also know it is not always appropriate, or desired. I cannot force hugs upon anyone, nor should I try. My role as your pastor is far too important to jeopardize with un-welcome hugs, or any other un-acceptable behavior.

Everyone needs to feel safe when they are in our sanctuary. It matters not if they are a child or an adult. No one should be forced to do or endure anything that makes them un-comfortable or is against their will. And pastors certainly should not be the source of anyone's discomfort.

In our gospel lesson Jesus is approached with a question about divorce. It was a set up. There was a division in the Jewish community. Some followed the teachings of one who said any reason to divorce is acceptable while another school of thought forbid divorce under all circumstances except adultery. And remember in that time the punishment for adultery was stoning, someone died. Divorce was not usually the option. Those asking Jesus the question simply want to know whose side he was on.

Lets me put in a way that might make sense. It would be like someone asking Jesus the question "Is George W. Bush a good President?" Irregardless of his answer Jesus will upset some folks. If he says yes the Democrats will denounce him, and if he says No the Republicans will string him up. Do you see the dilemma they put Jesus in?

I found in one of those Internet information sites where someone asked the Question: *Does the Methodist church allow divorce? If so, how does it justify that Biblically, since Jesus basically forbade all divorce, except in cases of sexual immorality, and Paul only made an exception when a non-Christian spouse abandons a Christian spouse.*

A United Methodist pastor answered: *The United Methodist Church strongly encourages married couples to stay together, to seek counseling if necessary, in order to reconcile their differences. We hold this to be the ideal relationship in God's eyes. In a perfect world, there would be no divorce. But none of us is perfect, and we live in an imperfect world. We view divorce less as a sin in and of itself, and more as evidence of our sinful nature.*

*A couple who goes through a divorce may be, in effect, giving public testimony that their pre-marital counseling was inadequate. Or, one or both of them may have changed their minds. We accept this as a reality because it happens. Because the divorce process is painful, we offer counseling to divorced persons. If a divorced person ceases "to regard*

*(this) iniquity in their heart," confesses the sin, and repents, accepting the gift of forgiveness in Jesus' name, what are we to do but accept them as a sinner saved by grace? You ask how we justify our stance Biblically. We believe that Jesus died for all sins, even divorce.*

*I can't speak for all jurisdictions, but in (my state) marriage is a civil contract, licensed and documented by the government. Divorce, likewise, is a matter for the courts. Frankly, if it were as hard to get married as it is to get divorced, there would be far fewer divorces.*

I like the answer. Especially the part about forgiveness and that if it were harder to get married there would be fewer divorces. I am well acquainted with divorce. My parents divorced when I was four years old. My dad has gone through a second divorce. One of my sisters has divorced several husbands. Linda's dad has divorced, as has her sister. Many of friends and classmates have gone through divorces. I know about the pain and hurt, the sense of worthlessness and love lost.

Jim Smoke is an internationally known speaker and author of the best-selling book, *Growing Through Divorce*. The book is widely used today in Divorce Recovery seminars and counseling centers around the world. In an interview he said about divorce:

*The first thing I learned is that many people did not receive any premarital counseling and they were ill-equipped for marriage.*

*Second, many couples fail to get help when their marriage is in trouble. The church contributes to this because we tell people, "If you're a Christian, love God and follow Him closely; He will take care of your problems."*

*Third, marriages fail because couples grow apart rather than together. They haven't developed a nurturing marriage environment that allowed it to thrive and to grow.*

*Fourth, when the fabric of marriage weakens, couples become susceptible to an affair. About 68 to 70 percent of the people in our workshops have had a spouse leave them for somebody else. Affairs are not planned. They happen because a person finds someone with a warm heart who listens to his or her story.*

*Fifth, traditionally the church community has not shown kindness to divorced people. We would rather judge them and toss a handful of Bible verses at them. People need healing, not judgment. It's easier to throw rocks than to help people rebuild their lives.*

Smoke goes on to say: *Divorced people need to be accepted and loved. Many of them have faced rejection in their marriages by mates who left them for someone else. They wonder if they can ever be loved by anybody. They lose their self-worth, self-esteem, and self-values. Love and acceptance offset these feelings. **Accepting a divorced person doesn't mean you accept divorce. Jesus hates sin, but He loves people and sinners. Divorced people need to be accepted and loved.***

That is what we all desire, to be accepted and loved. I think a safe sanctuary is one where anyone can find that love and acceptance. I want you to help me make sure that this Church is just such a Safe Sanctuary.

Our church needs to be a safe place where people, all people, are accepted and loved. And not with our physical, eros type of love, but loved with the love of God, that Holy Love that is ours to share.