

Just Relationships

Mark 10:2-16

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At the first congregation I served in Northern California, on the very first Sunday of my ministry there, members of the congregation filed past me after worship, shaking my hand, and welcoming me to the church. It was all smiles until a middle-aged woman came through the line, pulled me toward her, and shouted, “Pastor, do you think divorced people are going to hell?” I thought I had passed all of my ordination exams, but this encounter felt like the surprise question I didn’t expect, delivered on my very first day of ministry.

Later that week I went to visit her for a longer conversation, and she told me about her son who had been recently divorced. Behind her question after the worship service was a deep love and concern for him. He had chosen to end a troubled marriage and was about to remarry. She opened her Bible and read for me the passage from Mark which is our gospel text this morning. She also told me that she grew up a Roman Catholic and still carried many of her Catholic beliefs about sin and punishment. Divorce and remarriage were not options for Catholics, she told me. “What about Presbyterians?” she asked.

Let’s be honest. This text from Mark, taken at face value, is one of those troubling passages in the New Testament that makes many of us squirm. It *does* sound harsh and judgmental, completely out of tune with the contemporary realities of marriage and divorce. In a culture in which fewer people get married at all and some get married later in life; in a culture in which half of the couples getting married today eventually get divorced; and in a culture in which parenthood does not need the institution of marriage, these verses from Mark seem outdated and simply irrelevant to many of us who read them today.

But in this story, we find Jesus caught up in a specific set of difficult circumstances, and living within a particular historical context of marriage and family, and all of that must be considered as we approach this text in order to figure out what it may mean for us. There is much, much more here than a literal reading of the text reveals, perhaps even the grace and mercy of God.

We find Jesus drawn into a heated argument among competing factions of Jewish teachers over the legitimate reasons for Jewish men to divorce their wives, and if they are allowed to remarry. Some teachers cited Jewish law that said that if the wife “does not please her husband because he finds something objectionable about her,” then he can write her a certificate of divorce. What were these objectionable things? What were these grounds of divorce?¹

There were several schools of rabbinic thought about what constituted “something objectionable:” one school said it was enough if she was a lousy cook and burned his dinner; another school insisted on more serious and substantial reasons for divorce, such as adultery. Still others believed that Jewish law forbade a man from remarrying as long as his wife was alive. Jewish priests could not marry divorced women. And to complicate matters even more, Roman law, the civil law of the prevailing culture, allowed a woman to divorce her husband, a right that Jewish women did not have under Jewish law.

And so, as is true with any law where loopholes are created, a relentless push was underway in Judaism to expand the list, to create even more loopholes. This is the legal quagmire that the Pharisees were trying to drag Jesus into.

¹ See A. Katherine Grieb, PhD, “Is it Lawful?” *The Christian Century*, September 28, 2009

What is striking about Jesus' answer is that he redirects the issue from what is lawful or allowed to what God has intended from the beginning about marriage. Quoting from both creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, Jesus stresses permanence, exclusivity, partnership and God's initiative. "The two" called into marriage are to leave behind even their parents to become joined in mutual support and affection. In an ideal marriage, these two are seen as equal partners.

Remember that in Jesus' day, Jewish women and children had very few rights. For most Jewish women, there was no such thing as alimony or any other safety net. Divorce usually meant poverty and destitution for the rest of their lives unless they had come from a wealthy family and had inherited family property. Men could do what they wanted; divorced Jewish women became victimized, tossed aside, with no recourse.

And Jesus, by lifting up the high ideals of marriage from the opening chapters of Genesis, directly challenges the prevailing cultural notion that men hold the power in the marriage relationship, that a man can simply set aside his wife. Marriage creates a union in which two people participate and "become one flesh"—they are *both* changed--a sacred relationship with mutual responsibility. One person cannot just set the other aside.

This dialogue about marriage and family seems rather out of place here in Mark's gospel, particularly since Jesus devotes so much of his teaching in Mark to critiques of those in religious, political, and economic power. So far, Jesus has spent the majority of his time in Mark confronting systemic injustice and oppression. And so, it's fair to ask, isn't this talk of marriage a little off topic?

Perhaps not. There is injustice and oppression everywhere, even in our homes. Sometimes especially in our homes. This text confirms that for Jesus, the personal is political, as the old axiom goes. The same ethic of justice we apply to the Middle East right now, that the Palestinian people be granted the same right to self determination that Israel has enjoyed since it's founding, is the same ethic of justice we apply to the most intimate relationships of our lives.

On the subject of marriage and divorce in the church today, we must be honest with ourselves and acknowledge the church's damaging history of complicity in legitimizing violence against women by requiring them to stay in dangerous marriages. This is certainly not an appropriate understanding of Jesus' claim about the meaning of marriage. Unarguably, with intimate partner abuse, Jesus' standard of mutuality and companionship is breached. And Mark's overarching message about relational justice and the upending of hierarchies in the most intimate relationships of our lives makes it impossible for us to interpret this text as requiring the subjugation of women to violent partnerships.

At the same time, though, in this passage Jesus speaks against casual treatments of marriage that threaten to trivialize its significance in which people glide all too easily in and out of relationships. Celebrity marriages that end when the honeymoon is over, reality TV shows like *The Bachelor*, and a stunning proposal several years ago in the Mexican federal legislature to allow two-year, renewable marriage licenses are but a few extreme examples of how modern marriage in our culture is no longer regarded as a "till death do us part" institution.

Tragically, those relationships that promise the greatest joy in life also hold the potential for the deepest hurt. No one should abandon a sacred relationship without making every effort to heal and transform the brokenness. But when the struggle has been engaged deeply and honestly and still has not succeeded, or when trust has been breached so deeply that it cannot be repaired, then we have a sacred responsibility as followers of Jesus to reach out to hurting people with a faith that embraces the past in forgiveness and opens the future in hope.

The pressures on marriage today are enormous. Mobility, loneliness, rootlessness, economic strains, the stresses of raising children and many other factors can take a daily toll. Without compromising our essential commitment to the ideal of faithful, monogamous lifelong marriage, we need to be clear that divorce is sometimes the alternative that gives hope for life, and that remaining in a bad marriage is sometimes the alternative which delivers only death.

I once praised a couple for their long marriage, only to hear one of them say, "It is only by the grace of God that we have remained married all these years" and to see the other nod and laugh in agreement. The "hardness of heart" Jesus warns the disciples about in this text is not limited to married people, and it certainly isn't limited to those who have experienced the agony of a failed marriage. Marriage is hard work, and the continuing softening of our hearts towards one another over time is one of God's greatest gifts to us in married life. No wonder the early church fathers and mothers taught that marriage, like monasticism, is a training ground for the kingdom of God, the reign of God.

The gospel writer Mark, ever the great storyteller, has paired this hard teaching of Jesus about divorce with this grace-filled story of about Jesus welcoming and blessing "the little ones," the little children, over the objection of the disciples. "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. And Jesus took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them."

The reign of God is open to those who receive it the way a little child receives it—as a sheer gift to those with no power, no rights, no status, and no sense of their own achievement.

Whether we have married or not, whether we have succeeded in marriage or failed or some of each, we are not rejected children. We are not kept away from Jesus. We are loved, welcomed, and blessed by the God who made us for God's own self.

Amen.