

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 3, 2021
 “Taking a Stand for Marriage” (Mark 10:2-6)

I have to tell you that I was really tempted to preach on the first or second readings this morning. That would have been much easier than preaching on the gospel text. Still, I thought we should wrestle with this passage and see what the Spirit might be saying to us through these words of Mark.

The setting is yet another confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees are once again testing Jesus, hoping he will say something to incriminate himself. *Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?* But in typical Jesus fashion, he answers their question with a question of his own: *What did Moses command you?* And they respond: *Moses said a man could write a certificate of dismissal and divorce his wife.* To which Jesus responds: *He only wrote that because of your hardness of heart. But here is what God desires for marriage: when a man and a woman marry, they become one flesh and no one should separate what God has joined together.*

Then later, when one of the disciples asks him again about the issue, Jesus speaks very matter-of-factly against divorce. And this is what I find challenging about this text. For centuries, these words of Jesus have been used to condemn and punish people who have been divorced. His words seem like an ironclad law, with no exceptions. *If you remarry after you divorce, then you have committed adultery.*

But somehow, this seems too harsh a word coming from the lips of Jesus, who is the incarnation of God’s love in the world. It seems a bit too harsh coming from the one who, at other times, is so caring, so forgiving, and so compassionate. And it seems too black and white – too cut and dry – from someone who encouraged people to see things with new eyes.

So, why does Jesus respond the way he does? Perhaps he is still angry over the death of John the Baptist. John, you will remember, was thrown into prison and eventually beheaded because he condemned the marriage of Herod and Herodias, a divorced woman, who had been married to Herod’s brother. Even though the Jewish idea of marriage was held in very high esteem, the divorce rate was an acute problem in Israel. John had met this issue head-on when he criticized the Jewish leader’s marriage. Here, Jesus is in Judea where Herod lives and serves as tetrarch. And it is here the Pharisees try to entrap him – setting him up so that he might meet the same fate as John.

Finding himself once again in dispute with these bloodthirsty enemies of his, perhaps Jesus responds so strongly because of their relentless attempts to discredit him with their legalism. Like John before him, he denounces the marriage practices of Herod and his family. No one should divorce on a whim or for power arrangements. Jesus condemns using marriage this way. He makes it clear that marriage is sacred and grounded in God’s divine plan for ordering human life. Therefore, it is not to be based on lust, or greed, or convenience, or political arrangements.

Or maybe Jesus speaks so strongly because this is a justice issue for him. Think about who it is that comes to question him. Men. And what do they ask him? *Is it lawful for a MAN to divorce*

his wife? This speaks volumes about the place of women – not only in Moses’ day – but in Jesus’ day, as well. Certainly, Moses did not condone divorce, but was trying to manage a situation that was degenerating. In an attempt to control divorce, he reduced it to a law in order to make it more difficult. But men interpreted it as granting them the authority to divorce at will. All they had to do was write up the divorce decree, get a couple of witnesses, and the wife was gone. He was then free to move on to his next concubine.

According to Deuteronomy 24, a man could divorce his wife if he found something objectionable or indecent about her. I read in William Barclay’s commentary that there were two schools of thought about what was objectionable or indecent. The first said only in cases of adultery could a man divorce his wife. If the wife was not unfaithful, her husband could not divorce her. According to the second school of thought, what was considered objectionable could have been something as simple as spoiling a dish of food, talking to a strange man, or having a loud voice. Well, human nature being what it is, we can guess that it was the second view that prevailed, and divorce for trivial reasons – or for no reason at all – was too commonplace in Jesus’ culture.

And the women had no power. A woman divorced on her husband’s whim was left with nothing. Because she was considered mere property of the man, there were no allowances made for her when the marriage ended. If she had no family to take her in, she would either starve or support herself by turning to begging or prostitution. She would also lose her children since they were considered property of the father. And, for all intents and purposes, she would be unmarriageable. So, the future for a divorced woman was very bleak. Perhaps Jesus, who believed that everyone had value, was speaking out about this inequality and how easily women were being discarded; and this was an issue that made him angry.

When the Pharisees come to Jesus wanting to talk about divorce and its legality, do you notice what Jesus does? He moves the focus of the conversation from divorce to marriage. He goes all the way back to Genesis – to the beginning of creation – and lifts up God’s desire for marriage: that a man and woman, joined in this holy covenant, would remain married throughout their lives.

Jesus wants them to understand that marriage is a relationship based on mutual love, respect, and the building up of one’s partner. This covenant presumes equal standing. Anything less that this is not what God intended from the beginning. Think about scripture’s account of Eve’s origin. God said it wasn’t good for man to be alone. God wanted his people to be in loving relationships, so God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep and used one of his bones to create Eve. She was not made from a bone in Adam’s head so that she would be above him. Nor was she made out of a bone in Adam’s foot so that she would be below him. She was made out of a rib from Adam’s side so that she would stand with him and by him. Marriage is to be a shared life with husband and wife being equal partners.

One of the keys to interpreting this passage, I believe, is when Jesus tells the Pharisees that Moses permitted divorce only because of their hardness of heart. Since the beginning of time, humans have not only rebelled against God, but have rebelled in their relationships with one another. And that continues to be true. People sometimes physically or verbally abuse their

spouses, they are unfaithful, one tries to hold absolute power over the other, one is not emotionally present and supportive, or one partner is not dedicated to the union and is unwilling to work through difficult times.

These are all examples of having a hard heart. Sin tells us to work for what *we* want instead of what is best for the couple. And when hard hearts cause a marriage to be broken, it often ends in divorce, which is another symptom of human sinfulness. Mistakes are made. Our relationships break down. They no longer reflect the fidelity, love, and peace that God intends for all creation.

And this is another place I struggle with this text. If marriages don't reflect God's intention for deep, mutually abiding love and peace; if there is abuse, or neglect, or dominance, would Jesus want us to stay in such relationships? Are there legitimate reasons for divorce?

Luther said that scripture interprets scripture. If a verse is difficult – like the one before us – we should try to interpret it within its context. And we've done that to try to understand why Jesus spoke so harshly. Maybe he was angry that John had been killed for speaking up for marriage as God had intended. Maybe he was fed up with the Pharisees and their exhaustive legalism, or maybe he was speaking out for women's rights.

Then, said Luther, if the context is not helpful, we should look at similar passages elsewhere in scripture. So, I want us to look at Jesus in other places to help us understand him here.

Jesus, remember, is the one who saved the woman caught in adultery from being stoned. And if things had been equal, he would have saved a man in the same situation. He is the one who promised life-giving water to the five-time married Samaritan woman. He held up the woman who washed his feet with her hair as an example of love, faithfulness, and hospitality. He is the one who called Matthew – a clear violator of the law – to be his disciple. He is the one who forgave Peter for denying him. Jesus always embodied the forgiving love of God for all the world – especially those on the margins of society.

Yes, Jesus lifts up marriage as a life-long commitment, He reminds us that we need to take our vows seriously, for there is great beauty in promises made and kept throughout a lifetime of ups and downs. This is God's desire for us. Yet, because of his forgiving nature found in other scriptures, I believe he forgives those of us who have been divorced – especially when the marriage is one that devalues us and keeps us from living up to our God-given potential.

Jesus knows that, like everything else in the brokenness of this world, marriages do not exist sin-free. No relationship does. All of us – young or old, single, married or divorced, stand each and every day in need of God's grace and forgiveness. And the good news is that God, in Christ, offers us that.

The passage ends with Jesus taking children in his arms. He honors those his society gives no value and invites us to do the same. The passage, you see, is not just about the marriage relationship, but about our relationship with the world. When we follow Christ as his disciple, we are called to serve all the children of the world: the forgotten, the shamed, the hopeless, the poor, the widow, because Jesus came to share his unconditional love with those whom the world

seems to have so little love to give. And we do it, not because a law tells us to, but because we respond to the love and grace Christ pours into our lives. Amen.