

Reflection for October 3, 2021

Mark 10:2-16

This is a Sunday when the lectionary gives us a text to explore that I really would rather skip over. It's one I struggle with for a lot of different reasons. It would be so much easier to focus only on the cuddly part of the gospel passage about Jesus blessing the children.

The first part of the passage is Jesus responding to the Pharisees' question about divorce. It is hard to meet someone who hasn't been affected by the messiness and pain of divorce. Even the most amical divorce can invoke a sense of loss and grief. It brings up all sorts of feelings from anger to defensiveness, sadness, and even relief.

I remember as a kid when we got our first (and I believe only) divorced minister at our church. I was young and I don't remember too much judgement, but I do remember people talked about it. There is a lot of baggage around the subject.

I was talking it over with my dad, trying to figure out what I might say today, and he said, "Don't ask me, I've only been divorced once!"

Our gospel reading today from Mark has Jesus leading the disciples toward Jerusalem (Mark 11). In their travels and teachings, Jesus has tried to help the disciples find their way into what God desires. Interestingly, he is not calling them to acts of spiritual prowess. Rather he is asking them to live well in their common human condition and in such mundane realities as family, wealth, and their gathered community. Jesus has consistently asked them to use what they have in service of those who are most vulnerable: children, the poor, those denied status. And in this week's passage, Jesus continues to develop this theme of serving the vulnerable, this time in the context of marriage and divorce.

The text opens with the Pharisees testing Jesus by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

Why would this be a test? Perhaps because the issue was divisive enough that any answer Jesus gives will be unpopular. One commentator thinks perhaps they have another kind of trap in mind: the only other (implicit) reference to divorce in the Gospel of Mark is the story of Herod and Herodias (Hero-dee-as), in which John the Baptizer criticizes their marriage as “not lawful” — no doubt at least partly because Herodias had to divorce Herod’s brother first (Mark 6:18). In other words, the question may be a “test” because of its potential to lure Jesus into criticizing Herod, a dangerous proposition.

In typical Jesus fashion, he turns the tables, and has his questioners answer their own question — and they reply, *Yes, divorce is lawful*, (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Jesus’ response to the Pharisees answer seems to be even more restraining than the law of Moses. “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ (Gen 2:24) So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” (Mark 10:5-12).

Here is where I struggle. Jesus seems so uncompromising. And it is passages like this that have been used to promote the perspective that marriage is indissoluble, leaving many believers to feel at odds, hurt, targeted, even traumatized by these texts, sometimes even keeping people in abusive relationships.

God's original vision for marriage, Jesus insists, is that two people are inseparably joined and become "one flesh," and the capricious divorce, with men simply deciding that "she does not please him," or finding "something objectionable about her," and then ending the marriage portrayed in Deuteronomy 24 violates that original vision. Likewise, privately with his disciples, Jesus equates remarriage with adultery — strikingly phrasing his teaching in egalitarian terms, as though both men and women have equal agency: "...divorces his wife...divorces her husband..." (Mark 10:11-12).

When approaching a difficult text, especially one that bumps up against our personal understanding of God, my Hebrew Bible prof often encouraged us to look for the mercy in the story. So I have tried to apply that here. Could Jesus be showing mercy and compassion, somewhere in these harsh words?

With that in mind, I think it's crucially important here to look at the historical context. In first century Palestine, marriage and divorce were profoundly patriarchal institutions in which women and children were technically considered the property of men. By contrast, in ancient Roman society, both husbands and wives could initiate divorce, and there's evidence that at least some Jewish wives could, too — but in the main, Jewish law traditionally gave that power to husbands. The proper grounds for divorce, however, were a matter of considerable dispute in Jesus' day. Some taught that only adultery could trigger divorce; others followed Deuteronomy's broader standard that anything "objectionable about her" — that is, objectionable to the husband — could suffice (Deut 24:1). Moreover, women and their children were highly dependent on marriage for their livelihood and wellbeing, and this dependence, combined with their husbands' ability to initiate divorce, put women and children in an acutely vulnerable position. To understand Jesus' teaching on divorce, we have to bear this

first-century Near Eastern context in mind. Who is most vulnerable in this picture? Women and children.

So, is this a categorical prohibition of divorce? On one level, Jesus is clearly critical of divorce in this passage, contrasting it with the divine ideal of becoming “one flesh.” But on the other hand, it’s striking that he draws this contrast without declaring Deuteronomy’s permission null and void. He doesn’t say, *Moses was mistaken*. Nor does he say, *The divorce described in Deuteronomy is no longer valid*. Rather, he effectively says, *What Moses says about divorce is well and good, but don’t forget: it’s an accommodation to human struggle, not an expression of the divine ideal. On the contrary, God’s ideal vision for marriage is that it entails becoming “one flesh,” two people who care for each other to such an intimate, life-giving degree that they become one, and they cannot be torn asunder. Don’t take that vision lightly. Strive toward it as best you can, and reserve divorce as a last resort. And to men, in particular, who might be tempted to take advantage of Moses’ words, “she does not please him” or “something objectionable about her” — think again! God calls you not to be selfish, entitled, and cavalier, but rather to be humble, to serve your spouse, and to serve your children.*

Jesus is speaking about real life, real pain and real hurt that divorce in his day could bring about for the most vulnerable in society. When we think about this scripture for today’s context, we can still ask, “who needs protecting?” The Law of Moses was given for the protection of the self and the protection of the community, and for the flourishing of the self and others. Marriage and divorce should not be undertaken with a cavalier attitude. However, I can’t believe that God would want to stay in relationships that don’t bring about that protection and flourishing.

Why does Jesus insist upon striving for the “bone of my bone,” “one flesh” ideal? As someone who has never been married, I know that marriage isn’t for everyone, but I also know that for many people, a lifelong intimate partnership can be a key source of growth and happiness. And just as important, in the ancient world marriages could create sanctuaries of livelihood and wellbeing for women and children — and conversely, divorces could put women and children out into harm’s way. Here lies the deep kinship between Jesus’ teaching on divorce and his practice of welcoming children: Jesus is always specially concerned with protecting and advocating for the most vulnerable. And not only because they are susceptible to harm - Children, he says, can be open-minded, open-hearted, and therefore receptive to God’s blessings in exemplary ways. The rest of us should follow their lead: “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15).

The good news of the Gospel in this passage is that God cares especially for the most vulnerable, and calls us to do the same. Jesus evaluates social institutions (like marriage and divorce) through this lens, and he sees social groups (like children or outsiders) through it, too. Such groups deserve respect and protection, of course, but it’s also true that their wisdom and perspective deserve attention — not least because of what they can teach the wider community about faith, love, and “receiving the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:15).

Sources:

<https://www.saltproject.org>

www.workingpreacher.org

Feasting on the Word Commentary

As a child

*Truly I tell you, whoever does not
receive the realm of God as a little child
will never enter it.*

—Mark 10.15

Dependent,

requiring the help of others.

Weak,

without ability to make it happen.

Graced,

without having earned it, receiving it as pure gift.

Wondering,

not understanding, only delighting.

Imaginative,

living not in a proposition but a story.

Needy,

seeking not to be right but to be loved.

Humble,

knowing you are not an only child.

Playful,

for not everything is So Serious.

Trusting,

willing to hand yourself over.

Vulnerable,

without power, status, standing, voice or recourse.

Hear it: vulnerable,

at risk, and likely the first to suffer.

Cherished,

as the beloved child of a parent
who would, and will, die for you.

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