

Year B Proper 27 Welcome the Kingdom Mark 10:2-16

This is a really tough bit of Scripture to hear. It's tough to make sense of it in a world where divorce is common. It's tough to preach on it. We hear Jesus say to the religious leaders that when a person divorces one and marries another, that person is committing adultery. And we all know that "Thou shalt not commit adultery" is one of the 10 commandments.

This passage has caused much pain over the centuries and it has been used to enable male dominance and the oppression of women. How many women stayed with their husbands in years gone by because they were unable to get a job and support themselves if they were on their own? How many women endured physical and verbal abuse and the abuse of their children because this passage seems to suggest that that is precisely what needed to happen? And let's be fair, there are a significant number of men who endured the nastiness of their spouses or the debilitating addictions of their spouses – again, because of this passage. When divorce started to become more prevalent in society, how many divorced people were denied the spiritual nourishment of communal unity with God and with their siblings in Christ because the church looked upon them as sinners breaking Jesus' commands?

This passage is a perfect example of when not knowing the background history of Jewish society and when isolating bits of Scripture from the words around it can cause great pain and suffering. I'll be blunt – I do not worship a God who says people must suffer in an abusive relationship because they will be considered adulterers if they divorce. I believe in a God of love who boils down all of the law and the prophets into the two great commandments: Love God. Love your

neighbour as yourself. And I believe that we see this God of love in today's Gospel story so let's explore together.

This is the third Sunday in a row that children have been a major focus of the Gospel story. Two weeks ago, Jesus told us that whoever welcomes a child in his name welcomes him and welcomes God. We were told last week that if anyone were to put a stumbling block in front of one of those children, it'd be better for that person if a millstone were tied around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. Today we see the disciples trying to shoo the children away and Jesus indignantly telling them to knock it off. "Theirs is the kingdom," he tells them.

At the time when Jesus was speaking, not only were children lowly and humble and in need of protection and guidance, the children were aware of this. And children are questioning, eager to learn, and usually accepting of all others until the adults in their lives show them not to be. In the midst of Jesus' teaching on true greatness and the loving acceptance of society's low status and vulnerable people into God's kingdom, into the midst of that teaching comes the question of the Pharisees that begins our story today.

"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" The Pharisees know darn well what the law says about this – the Pharisees are experts on the laws of Scripture. Jesus knows they know – which is why he doesn't answer them. He first gets them to tell him what the law is. Why would the Pharisees ask Jesus about a law they already know? Well, Jesus has been teaching things that don't exactly line up with their teachings of the law. Jesus has been proclaiming a message of healing, of love, of inclusivity that is contrary to their teachings. Jesus has been correcting their misunderstanding of God's words and, in some instances, correcting their

deliberate misinterpretation of God's word that has made the laws work more to their advantage. For example, when the Pharisees answer Jesus, they paraphrase a law of Moses found in Deuteronomy (24:1-4). They say to Jesus that Moses allows a man to write a certificate of divorce and dismiss his wife. They neglect to mention that a man is given permission to divorce his wife if he finds something objectionable in her. For some, this meant anything objectionable and was providing the loophole for men to ditch their wives like we toss out used Kleenex. The other important piece of the law that the Pharisees leave out is that the certificate of divorce was supposed to be handed to the women. The certificate would provide a divorced woman with some defense against rumour and slander. For a majority of women in that culture, survival depended upon being a member of a household. A woman, perhaps with children, without a husband and without a means of explaining why she was unmarried, could be exposed to great risk. The law's provision about the certificate seeks to lessen that risk, yet the Pharisees don't mention it.

I am sure you noticed that the law the Pharisees quoted is from the man's perspective. The man is allowed to divorce his wife. In the ancient world, marriage was primarily a means of ensuring a family's economic stability and social privileges (by creating alliances and children that would join two families together for the mutual benefit of both families). A woman's sexuality was essentially the property of her father and then of her husband. Now, the individual Pharisees were not necessarily bad people. The overall cultural thinking was skewing the power towards men. The protective mechanisms put into place in the law of Moses were being overlooked and misinterpreted so that the power

could stay with the men...and women were suffering because of it. Jesus reminds the Pharisees that marriage is meant to be a unifying bond between two people, an extension of the love of God.

Jesus' most shocking words likely slipped past us without us batting an eye – he mentions women who divorce their husbands. Then, when Jesus later clarifies his thinking to his disciples, he specifically mentions those who divorce in order to marry another. He is pushing back against the law being used as a loophole to cast off one person and move on to another without regard for the reputation or safety of the one left behind. Jesus is pushing back against the oppressive and abusive patriarchy of his day at the same time cautioning the women that they need to play by the inclusivity and equality rules of the kingdom as well.

The endgame of Jesus' teaching is to protect the vulnerable. At that time, this was nearly exclusively women rather than men but it also included the poor of both sexes, the sick of both sexes, the physically challenged, and, of course, the children. It is no coincidence that Mark concludes Jesus' teaching with the story of Jesus blessing the children. "Jesus blesses them, not because they conjure [up] sweet images of [angelic] innocence, but because he has concern for the vulnerable and scorned, for those ripe for exploitation" (Matt Skinner, Working Preacher).

This passage makes it clear that it is important for us to be aware of, and understand, the cultural differences between our time and Jesus' time in order to understand and respect what Jesus is saying and why he is saying it. As the church has painfully learned over recent generations, to impose words such as these as unbreakable commands, without critically thinking through their

meaning, can result in the church denying protection and grace to those who need it. This passage also makes it clear that Scripture is meant to be taken as a whole. C.S. Lewis very astutely commented that people go to Scripture to find an ally when they should be going to Scripture to find their Master. Cherry-picked Scriptures can support just about whatever position you choose to support but that would be a misuse of Scripture. Mark surrounds this difficult teaching about marriage with stories of healing and inclusivity – especially of the vulnerable. Jesus tells us that we must welcome the kingdom as we would welcome a child. In other words, welcoming the kingdom is to ignore power and status. It is an embracing of the weak, the vulnerable, and the marginalized.

Married, divorced, widowed, or never married at all – we are all broken and vulnerable people invited to be healed by the love of God found in Jesus Christ. We are then invited to bring the world into the healing love of God in Christ. The Pharisees often were wrong about who is invited and who is not and so are we but, as children, we are learning. Let us welcome the kingdom of God.