

"Divorce"

Mark 10:2-16

4 October 2009, World Communion Sunday

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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²Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" ³He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" ⁴They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." ⁵But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' ⁷For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

¹⁰Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

¹³People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Prayer.

Welcome pastor, to the minefield.

I'd like to thank Jesus this morning,

For leaving such a wonderfully explosive issue

To subsequent generations of parish preachers

To interpret to anxious, fidgeting members and friends seated in the pews!

Most of us are aware of what Jesus said about divorce in the Bible

But because of its apparently harsh, legalistic impression

Many of us have relegated this passage

To the rotting heap of conveniently ignored scripture passages.

Though the road of least resistance is opposite,

And sometimes I have been guilty myself of avoiding conflict,

I've always believed that it is more important to be honest than polite.

So, this morning, at the risk of being impolite,

I'd like to take the more difficult road

And speak about Jesus' teaching about divorce.¹

¹ My comments on Mark 10:2-16 are heavily dependant upon the exceptional scholarly work of Matt

Some background:

1. We assume divorce is a modern phenomena;
It isn't.

In the first century, during the time of Jesus,
Divorce was a generally accepted part of the cultural landscape.
It was just as painful then as it is today.
It is important to be mindful that it was just as prevalent then as it is now.

2. Marriage in the ancient world
was primarily a means of economic and social stability.
Women, and their children, were considered property of the father,
In essence, sold to a husband in marriage through the exchange of a dowry.
Marriage united family and created offspring
And was essential for keeping the peace and keeping the family line intact.

3. Public leaders spoke about how divorce was bad for society,
However, mostly the debate was focused on the legal aspects.
The majority of religious leaders agreed that the foundational Torah element is
found at Deuteronomy 24:1-2:

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife.

In other words

Deuteronomy assumes divorce will occur and proscribes procedures for carrying it out.

The procedure ensured dependant women and children
A defense against rumor and slander,
A very important consideration for survival,
Let alone remarriage.

The hardhearted Pharisees questioning Jesus
Conveniently fail to mention the strong, moral imperative in the Law
That provides justice for the vulnerable: women and children.
However, other Pharisees, like those attempting to trap Jesus this morning
Called into question the permissibility of divorce
Citing Malachi 2:13-16 and Genesis 2:24, which we heard this morning:

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Experts in the Law were not in agreement on the issue of divorce.

Skinner, Associate Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, and the pod cast
"Sermon Brainwave."

What better controversy to trap Jesus
Than one that is hotly debated by the religious community?

4. Which brings us to the set up for the Gospel passage;
this narrative is one of many in a long succession of reports
about how religious authorities are attempting to trap Jesus,
to find cause to have him arrested,
and to have him put to death.
This passage and Jesus' response must be viewed through this lens.

Let's look carefully at the words of Jesus:

1. Jesus answers a question with a question.
He knows the minefield the Pharisees have laid.
He knows they are divided themselves.
He knows their absolute devotion to the Law.
And he knows that Hebrew scriptures, the Law and the prophets, are in conflict and
less than clear.
'Jesus,' they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"
"What did Moses command you?"
"Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her."
Good answer! They know the Law.
But Jesus sees their callous and hardened heart:

*"Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But
from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' ⁷For this
reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,
⁸and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one
flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."*

Better answer! Jesus favors two becoming one flesh.
He moves beyond the simple justice advanced by the Law
Takes it a step further
And advocates for the value of equality and unity.
Jesus makes the point that this is what marriage is all about:
Two equal partners.
One without the other breaks the whole thing.
Two cogs that drive the wheel;
Take one cog away and the whole process brings the wheel to a stop.
Two equal partners that are so unified
They become one flesh,
One body.
What sensible Pharisee will discount Genesis 2 in public?
Not one of them.
And they slink away, like the snakes they are,
defeated once again in their attempt to trap Jesus,

Because, as always,
Jesus takes the Law as the foundation
And advances it with a new covenant
That is rooted in grace.

2. Jesus uses the early confrontation with the adversarial Pharisees
as a talking point later in the day
in the privacy of a house with his disciples.
They, and we, want to know more.
And Jesus wants to tell them.

"the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Jesus seems to be speaking specifically against those who leave their partners for others,

Be it the husband or the wife.

His point is that divorce does not offer a legal loophole to justify adultery.

Be warned, Jesus is telling us frankly,

Do not initiate divorce as a means to get something else.

Do not sacrifice a spouse to satisfy one's desires or ambitions.

It is no accident that this passage is immediately followed by

The disciples attempting to keep children away from Jesus

And his powerful response:

"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Do not sacrifice a spouse,

Do not sacrifice the children,

To satisfy one's desires or ambitions.

Jesus doesn't throw anyone away.

He doesn't throw anyone under the bus.

And neither should we.

3. Women, take heart.

Men, listen carefully.

Jesus elevates women to a place of equality in marriage,

Hardly seeing women as passive objects or property.

Responsibility is balanced:

If a man leaves for another – adultery.

If a wife leaves for another – adultery.

This is such a volatile position to take in the ancient world

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The parallel narrative in Matthew conveniently omits it!²

Also, by speaking of a man committing adultery *against a woman*,

Not against her father or past husband,

Jesus implies that adultery involves more than the violation of property rights of another man.

Adultery concerns accountability to a partner.

Jesus is calling us to accountability in relationships,

Accountability in marriage.

4. I applaud Jesus for not avoiding the issue;

Especially later in the day when asked to elaborate by his disciples behind closed doors.

His words help us understand better why failed marriages

Bring such pain to couples, extended families, and communities.

Jesus brings into laser focus the hurt and brokenness that come,

Even when divorce appears to be the best among all available options.

His special attention towards children

Should be cold water in our face:

The most vulnerable are often the most victimized when parents divorce.

The church has learned over the centuries

That to impose these words uncritically,

Without interpretation,

as inflexible commands,

is to do violence, deny protection, and withhold grace

to those who need it most.

Yield not to the temptation to view these words of Jesus as quaint and outdate,

Relegating this narrative to the scrap heap of volatile scripture that best be skipped over or read quickly and silently.

Jesus urges us to regard marriage in stark contrast

To our culture's tendency to treat commitment and love as conditional.

Jesus is opposed to adultery.

The Law is followed.

Women and children are elevated,

And women are afforded equal accountability in the marriage relationship.

No one is to be thrown away.

In marriage, the individual becomes sub-servant to the unified mutual.

Two become one.

One flesh,

Connected to the One,

Lord, and savior of us all, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

² See Matthew 19:9