

***Women and Children Count Too***  
**A Sermon on Mark 10:1-16**  
**World Communion Sunday**  
**October 3, 2021**

**Introduction**

It is World Communion Sunday. We are celebrating the unity of Christians all over the world. And the lectionary gives us Jesus' teachings about divorce.

This is a difficult text for ministers to preach. More than half of the members of most congregations have been divorced. The divorce rate among ministers is higher than the divorce rate among the laity. Ministers tend to marry the church and neglect their families.

Psychologists would disagree with the traditional reading of this text. There is nothing unhealthier than a bad marriage. Many couples grow apart or are incompatible from the start, and they would be better off without each other.

So how do we hear any good news in this text? If we dig deeper, we may just find that Jesus' difficult sayings about divorce actually complement the theme of World Communion Sunday.

**First Move: Testing Jesus**

This text has been ripped from its context in Mark. All that is remembered is the prohibition against divorce. The traditional Christian reading of this story is a legalistic interpretation of the kind that Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for making.

This text takes place while Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem, making three passion predictions, teaching disciples about the reversal of values that takes place in the kingdom of God. As we are grappling with this text and its difficult teaching, we should keep in mind the larger point that Mark is making, "What does it tell us about the kingdom?"

The crowds gather round, traveling with Jesus. He begins to teach them, as he was accustomed to do. The Pharisees also approach Jesus. They ask him a question about divorce *to test him*.

Once Jesus gets to Jerusalem in Mark's gospel, the Pharisees will get together with the Herodians to test Jesus by asking a question about paying tribute to Caesar. The Herodians are supporters of Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee who beheaded John the Baptist. Antipas taxed the Galileans heavily to pay for his massive building

projects. The peasants hated the taxes. The Pharisees hoped to force Jesus to take sides, either way, he would lose. Either he would lose support with the peasants by telling them to pay the tax or he would be arrested for telling them not to pay the tax.

Something similar is going on in today's text. The Pharisees ask Jesus, "Is it permitted for a husband to divorce his wife?"

This is a strange question to ask. There was no debate among Israelites as to whether divorce was permitted. The only debate was over what were the proper grounds for divorce. The leading text on divorce in the Hebrew Bible is Deuteronomy 24:1-4. A man could give a woman a certificate of divorce if he found her objectionable. The debate in first-century Judaism was, what does objectionable mean? Conservatives thought that it could only mean adultery. Liberals thought a man could divorce his wife if she displeased him for any reason. If the Pharisees were actually interested in debating the meaning of Scripture, you would expect them to ask Jesus what were legitimate grounds for divorce.

By testing Jesus with the question, the Pharisees may have been hoping that he would criticize Herod Antipas. Jesus has just moved into Judea, which is Herod's territory. Herod's divorce is the only divorce that is mentioned in the Gospel of Mark. Herod's first wife was a foreign princess. He married her for political reasons. He divorced her and married his brother's wife, Herodias, for lust. John the Baptist criticized Herod's marriage to Herodias and he got beheaded for it. John is a forerunner for Jesus in Mark's gospel. John is handed over to the authorities and executed, just as Jesus will be. The Pharisees may be hoping that Jesus will be arrested immediately if he answers the question by criticizing Herod.

Jesus instead answers a question with a question, "What did Moses command?" The Pharisees replied, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and divorce her." The Pharisees are quoting from Deuteronomy 24. The Greek word for divorce is ἀποστάσιον—it means to stand away from, release, abandon.

This understanding of divorce is patriarchal. The man treats the woman like property. The man releases his claims on the property and abandons the woman.

Jesus said, "It is because of your hardness of heart that Moses wrote this commandment for you. It violates God's intent for creation."

The Greek word for hardness of heart is σκληροκαρδία. It is the root of the English word *sclerosis*, which means hardening of the arteries. We think of hard hearted as meaning that you are cold, you lack compassion. Not so in the ancient world. The heart was considered the seat of our desires, the seat of our will. Hardness of heart means hardness of will. Hard hearted could be translated as hard headed

today. Your will resists God's will. Jesus is saying that your will violates God's will for creation.

Jesus goes back to the creation story in Genesis 2. Jesus says that God's vision in creation is for people and animals to live in harmony. A man will leave behind his father and mother and will be faithfully devoted to his wife. They come into covenantal relationship with each other. The covenant binds them together. Just as God is one, the man and the woman will be one flesh. They are no longer two but one flesh.

Jesus is quoting one part of Scripture against another. This is something that we don't see anywhere else in the Gospels. Many scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was written in Galilee. Richard Horsley, a New Testament scholar, says that the Galileans had only been under the rule of Judea for about 100 years. Before that Galilee, which was in the Northern Kingdom, and Judea, which was in the Southern Kingdom, were conquered by different foreign empires. Deuteronomy is a retelling of the Moses story; scholars believe it was written in large part by priests in Jerusalem. Deuteronomy may not have been part of the Scripture in Galilee while it was separated from Judea. Part of the hostility to the Pharisees in the Gospels is that they were headquartered in the Southern Kingdom; their fame was as interpreters of the Law. Horsley believes there is a regional rivalry at play in the Gospel of Mark, the Galileans against the Judeans. Jesus represented the Galileans and the Pharisees represented the Judeans. Mark is describing Jesus as a local hero.

Jesus stands up to the test. He responds to a question about divorce by criticizing Herod's divorce and remarriage in code language, and he uses Scripture that was recognized in Galilee to overcome the arguments of the smooth interpreters of Scripture from Judea.

## **Second Move: Everybody Counts**

Jesus also makes a deeper point about what life is like in the kingdom of God. Marriage was not a sacrament until several centuries later. Polygamy was still permitted under Jewish law. Marriage contracts were property contracts. They set forth the dowry that would be paid to the man for marrying the woman. Jesus is saying, "No, marriage is a sacred relationship. Two people are brought together in a sacred covenant." Marriage ceremonies today use this covenant language: the marriage covenant is like our covenant with God. Two partners should be faithful to each other, just as God is always be faithful to us.

Jesus goes into the house to teach the disciples in private. The disciples ask again about divorce and Jesus says, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another

commits adultery against her, and if after she divorces her husband she marries another, she commits adultery.”

This is a critique of Antipas and Herodias. Jesus says that their marriage is adulterous.

Christian tradition takes Jesus’ critique of patriarchy and of the marriage between Antipas and Herodias and turns it into a legalistic prohibition against divorce. Legalisms can do great damage. It takes the life out of a dynamic image of covenant and hardens it into a fossilized proposition. Literalizing the Gospels turns good news into bad news.

The children were approaching Jesus so that he might touch them, give them a blessing. The disciples rebuked them. The disciples were displaying the hardness of their hearts.

Jesus saw this and got angry. He said to them, “Allow the children to come to me, do not hinder them, for of these is the kingdom of God.”

To be righteous in Jewish thought meant to study the Torah and do good deeds. Children were too young to do this. In next week’s text, a rich man will ask Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus discourages this kind of thinking. There are no entrance requirements for the kingdom. We enter the kingdom by being totally dependent upon God. We leave our material possessions behind, anything that will separate us from God.

Entering the kingdom evokes images of entering the Promised Land. The Hebrew slaves that were liberated from Egypt wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. They are referred to as an evil, adulterous generation for continually grumbling against God. The evil generation must die away so that a new generation can enter the Land. The children represent that new generation.

Jesus is challenging the way that people looked at the world in the first century. They thought of society as a pyramid with elites at the top. There was no middle class. Everyone else was at the bottom.

Their thinking was dominated by the concept of limited good. It is a closed system. People today think of the pie as expanding through economic growth. Synergy creates something new. This was foreign to the ancients. The pyramid never expands. New value comes into the system only from the gods. Grace is a translation of the Greek word, χάρις. The primary meaning is benefit. Benefits from the gods flowed only to the elites at the top of the pyramid. The elites must be rich because they are nearer to the gods. It is an ancient version of trickle-down economics. People at the bottom shared into those benefits only by entering into a patronage relationship

with the elites at the top. They pledged their loyalty and service to the elite in return for benefits.

The family was also thought of as a pyramid. Men were at the top. They were made in the image of the gods. Women and children were at the bottom, along with the household slaves.

This is an elitist vision of God. God is really the God of the elites, the God of men, and everyone below them on the pyramid can survive only by pleasing them.

Jesus blows up this model. Women and children are sacred, too. There is no pyramid. All people are near to God.

Jesus lifts up children as a role model. They receive the kingdom as a gift; this is the true nature of the kingdom. God gives gifts to everyone, not just the men and the elites at the top.

Mark's story ends when Jesus lays hands on the children and blesses them. The Greek word is *κατευλογέω*. It has the same root as our word for *eulogy*. To eulogize someone is to praise or bless them. Jesus calls down God's blessing or praise on the children.

### **Third Move: Sacred Relationships**

Mary and I went to Regional Assembly in Indianapolis in 2009. Sharon Watkins, our General Minister and President, was leading communion. She was telling the story about the feeding of the 5,000. In Matthew's version, there are 5,000 men, not counting women and children. Sharon said, "And we're going to count the women and children."

Jesus is telling his disciples that marriage is a sacred relationship. We miss the point by preaching against divorce. The focus of the text is on uplifting the sacred relationships in marriage and in family. Sacred relationships add new value to our lives. Everyone is sacred in God's eyes.

My favorite theologian is my wife, Mary. In our wedding vows, she said that I was a gift from God [Nobody had ever told me before that I was a gift from God]. That until we got married, she had seen gifts from God as a rain forest, the ocean, the sunrise, the stars in the night sky. Now she was adding me to the list. That gifts from God should be treasured and protected. And that she would treasure and protect me.

Jesus recognizes that this is an ideal. Until the kingdom arrives, we will have hard hearts. People may marry for the wrong reasons. Herod married for political gain and for lust. People still marry for the wrong reasons today. People may stop seeing their spouse as a gift. After they live with them for a while, they may seem more like

a curse. Divorce is allowed because of hard hearts, substituting our will for the will of God, marrying the wrong person for the wrong reasons.

Hard hearts also cause pain within marriage, without leading to divorce. Marriage can become a battle of hard hearts, my will against yours. It degenerates into a power struggle.

A married couple is one flesh. God has joined them together. They complement each other in an essential way. They create something new, a sacred relationship.

A covenant is based on a promise to put the relationship first. You don't put the other person first. You don't have to be submissive. That would be unhealthy. But you shift the center of your focus from yourself to the marriage. You ask yourself every day, How will what I am doing and what I am saying affect our marriage? When you are sacrificing or giving up things, it is not for the other person, it is for the relationship.

Joseph Campbell, a historian of world religions, says, "Marriage is not a love affair; it is an ordeal. If you think of it like that, you will be able to survive." The ordeal is to sacrifice your ego for the relationship. There is no power struggle. Each of you is serving the relationship. The two of you will become one.

There is joy in that, too. You will be sharing your life with someone who shares the same commitment, with someone who loves you unconditionally. You will become something greater than you are right now. You are part of a sacred relationship. You will see yourself transformed. The marriage will unhardened your heart.

## **Conclusion**

Maybe the lectionary does tie into World Communion Sunday. When we are disciples of Christ, we become something new. We become part of the body of Christ. We enter into holy relationship with the other parts of the body of Christ. All of us are made sacred.

On World Communion Sunday, we celebrate the sacred relationship we share with each other through Christ.

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