

## **Mark 10:2-16 – What Jesus says about Divorce**

Well, I have to be honest. Today's gospel lesson is not one I like to preach on at all. It comes up in the lectionary (the three-year cycle of lessons we use to guide our worship planning) once every three years. It is a text that makes me squirm because I have lived through a divorce myself and so have many others in the congregation. This week I read divorce rates are at 42%. Each year that the text comes up I think maybe this is one of those weeks I should preach on one of the other lessons. After some reflection, I decided that I cannot run away from gospel stories or any biblical stories I don't like. We can learn something from all of scripture.

So here we are. Once again, the Pharisees come to test Jesus. They ask, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

Jesus responds by challenging the disciples asking, "What did Moses command you?"

"Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her."

That is a really cold act isn't it? In the ancient of days, women were considered to be property owned by their husband. Children were a liability. If a man decided to divorce you all they had to do was write a divorce decree. That left women without a home, without a source of income, and generally without dignity at all. They would sometimes seek the streets to be prostitutes so they had some money. Women had no rights at all.

Jesus says to the Pharisees, “You know, it is because of your hardened hearts that Moses wrote this commandment to you.”

Then Jesus returns to Genesis and the text we hear many times at weddings and in our first reading today, “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. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Following this address to the Pharisees, the disciples dig a little deeper with Jesus. Jesus tells them, whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery. The same goes for women. Divorce was not looked upon favourably in ancient times.

The reality of Jesus’ day and ours is that divorce was/is painful. It has been said that some people grieve over a divorce like it is a death. It is after all, the death of a relationship. We do not want to invalidate people who are in abusive relationships that may find a sense of relief at divorce.

No one plans to get divorced when they get married. I can speak from experience. I felt like I was being judged at every turn. People would ask “How are you doing?” and give the head tilt because they - like most of us - really do not know what to say to recently separated people. The Good News is that God is with us during hardships. We are responsible for our own actions. We need Jesus in our lives to help us understand that God’s love is bountiful even when we feel hopeless.

(Pause)

If you recall, I said at the beginning that I have trouble preaching this text. It is about the divorce of a couple as we know in the traditional sense-man and wife.

In 2024 there are many relationships beyond just a married couple. Think about it: some people are not married but have lived together for years in a committed relationship. Perhaps they have children. Let's not forget the single individuals in our community. You may be widows or widowers, or have not found the right person or are happy just the way you are.

There is a group of individuals in our world that are part of the LGBTQIAS+ community. LGBTQIAS+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit. These descriptors simply identify gender identities and sexual orientation of individuals. In 2005 the government of Canada made same-sex marriages legal. The policy of the ELCIC is that clergy can preside at gay weddings in the church upon the following conditions: the Synod bishop gives their blessing, and the congregation gives its blessings by a fifty-one percent vote. If you are wondering, as your pastor I would not turn anyone who is in a same-sex relationship away from marriage. Again to be married in the church the congregation would need to approve it.

One of the things I will say to people is, "Do you think traditional male-female marriages are always more loving than gay marriages?" Every marriage has its ups and downs. Marriage is hard work. Both types of marriages can experience the same level of care and love for one another. Just the same, relationships prior to marriage can and should be just as loving as any other.

(Pause)

Jesus deflects the Pharisees' questions on the matter of the law and turns them instead to relationships. In particular, to God's hope that our relationships are more than legal matters but instead help us to have and to share more abundant life. The Creator's intention in Genesis is that we be in relationships of mutual dependence and health.

You see Jesus isn't just speaking to individuals The intention is for us to realize our role as individuals, community, and church. Everyone is called to protect the vulnerable, the hurting, those in need. Jesus is calling us to imagine communities centred in and on real relationships, that is, founded on love and mutual dependence and fostered by respect and dignity.

Now, here's the interesting part for me. Even though the discussion up to this point has been about divorce, I don't think that's really the heart of what's going on here. Which is why I'm grateful the lectionary includes the next verses describing the reaction of Jesus' disciples to those bringing children to Jesus to bless and, more importantly, Jesus' reaction to the same.

Let's recall the context: Jesus has announced his intention to go to Jerusalem to die and, in response, his disciples argue about who is the greatest. Jesus in turn tells them that to be great is to serve, and that the very heart of the kingdom he proclaims is about welcoming the vulnerable. In fact, he says that whenever you welcome and honor a child – one who had the least status and power in the ancient world – you

were actually welcoming and honoring Jesus. Now, on the heels of this conversation about the purpose of the law, some folks bring their children to be blessed and the disciples try to keep them away. And Jesus intervenes, forcefully, saying that welcoming the kingdom pretty much means welcoming children, that is, the vulnerable, those at risk, and those in need.

This whole passage I believe is about community. But it's not the kind of community we've been trained to seek. It's not, that is, a community of the strong, or the wealthy, or the powerful, or the independent. Rather, this is a community of the broken, of the vulnerable, of those at risk. It's a community, in other words, of those who know their need and seek to be in relationship with each other because they have learned that by being in honest and open relationship with each other they are in relationship with God, the very one who created them for each other in the first place.

This is what the church was originally about – a place for all those who had been broken by life or rejected by the powerful and who came to experience God through the crucified Jesus as the One who met them precisely in their vulnerability, not to make them impervious to harm but rather open to the brokenness and need of those around them.

Part of being human is to be insecure, to be aware of our need and, in light of the cultural preference for strength, power, and independence, to be embarrassed by our need. To be broken isn't something to be ashamed of. Rather, to be broken is, in fact, to be human. And to be human is to be *loved by God* and *drawn together into relationship* with all the others that God loves. Amen.