

**“Life Grounded in Grace of Resurrection”**

**Mark 10:1-16**

**Andrew Foster Connors**

**19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**October 4, 2015**

In today’s text, Jesus teaches about marriage and divorce. Happy World Communion Sunday! The timing made me think seriously about dropping this text in favor of another but apparently I’ve done that every three years for at least the past 9 years meaning I’ve never preached on it. Possibly I’ve been avoiding it.

I’m not sure this text can be read, much less preached without drudging up old wounds for those of you who have experienced divorce from the vantage of a spouse or a child or a friend or a family member. As someone who has not experienced divorce I’m wary of moralizing on something more complex and varied for those who experience it. A preacher friend of mine shared with me that his mother’s decision to divorce his father literally saved his life from the vortex of alcoholism and mental illness that eventually consumed his father. Divorce is almost never a problem that can be addressed by finger wagging from the pulpit – it is the outcome of a human brokenness that deserves deeper attention, care, and support, and discernment.

But avoiding a difficult text doesn’t do anyone any favors either. So we approach this text together, doing what we can to support each other on this journey with Jesus especially when the journey gets close to some of our deepest wounds.

[Mark 10:1-10 is read here]

They came to test him. “Is it lawful. . .” they asked him. It wasn’t such an unusual question. It was an ongoing topic of debate of the earliest rabbis. Rabbi Akiva argued that a man could divorce his wife “even if he found someone else prettier than she,” while the school of Shammai restricted divorce to cases of unchastity. The House of Hillel argued that a man had legal grounds to divorce his wife even if she spoiled his food. There was no general rule in the first century outlining the rules under which someone could obtain a divorce,<sup>1</sup> which is probably why the Pharisees asked Jesus about it. It was a contested question. The kind the rabbis specialized in debating.

I don’t blame them for asking the question that way. I don’t blame them for exploring divorce from a legal perspective. It’s a normal process for how we determine what is good and right in difficult situations. It’s a normal process for how we discern the limits of our ethics in tricky situations. I don’t blame the Pharisees for asking question in this way even if they were trying to test him.

---

<sup>1</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, 141.

The Pharisees who approach Jesus have in mind the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 24, the scriptural ground on which legal debates about divorce often took place. The text outlines a patriarchal system where divorce is in the hands of men. Marriage, at least from an early legal standpoint, was about property transfer; marriage was about preserving orderly family lines by making sure that the offspring produced by a woman could be traced back to a particular man; and marriage was about preserving purity, mostly the so-called sexual purity of women. The legal concept of divorce outlined in Deuteronomy 24 was built on these and other assumptions.

But Jesus doesn't argue his ethical answer to the question from Deuteronomy 24. He quotes Genesis: "From the beginning of creation, he says, 'God made them male and female.'" Deuteronomy 24 doesn't describe the ideal, Jesus argues, it's a concession that Moses made for the hardness of hearts. The real intent of marriage from the beginning of the Torah is relationship built on equal partnership, where the two people entering the marriage are on equal terms. That's God's intent from the very beginning, Jesus says. Despite those who draw on this text to assert that Jesus established marriage as only between a man and a woman, Jesus was not quoting Genesis to reinforce heterosexual norms. He was quoting Genesis to establish egalitarian norms.<sup>2</sup>

Deuteronomy 24, which does not object to the unequal position of men and women in society and in marriage – it reinforces it – is not the foundational text for questions of marriage and divorce, Jesus argues. Genesis is the text – the one that describes marriage in the ideal. Two people on equal footing, a point which is reinforced by Jesus when he takes his disciples aside and says to them that both men and women are capable of committing adultery in equal ways, an assertion that was contested and in many places in his time and is still contested today.<sup>3</sup>

In the ideal world, Jesus argues, there is no divorce. Two people come together and become one flesh, a sign of God's grace. In the ideal world, the kingdom of God, there is no divorce. It's a hope that every couple I have ever married begins with, including those whose marriages ultimately end in divorce. It's a hope that most of us hold when we attend a wedding. It's a hope that most children hold for their own parents. In an ideal world, there is no divorce. Divorce is a concession to our own brokenness.

---

<sup>2</sup> Of course it's likely (though not certain) that Jesus assumed heterosexual norms, but this is a very different thing from quoting a text to defend them.

<sup>3</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, in an essential article entitled "Jesus, Divorce, and Sexuality: A Jewish Critique" argues against the anti-Jewish attitudes present in much Christian feminist literature that incorrectly concludes that "Judean divorce practices were particularly unfair to women." She cautions against reading some of the Rabbi's claims as indicative of social fact. There is evidence that women in Jesus' time had the power to divorce, they were not completely dependent on men in all circumstances, and the Jewish world had already developed innovations like the ketubah – a signed contract designed specifically to protect women's economic needs in the case of divorce. She also warns against taking Jesus' "egalitarian move" in "placing women and men in the same position" as a move against the Jewish tradition, but rather a move that grows out of it. Levin, "Jesus, Divorce, and Sexuality: A Jewish Critique" in B. Lebeau, L. Greenspoon, and D. Hamm (eds.), *The Historical Jesus Through Catholic and Jewish Eyes*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International 2000), pp. 113-130.

And if every marriage were always based on the vision of Genesis. Where both spouses always stand on equal footing, receiving what they need and giving what they need in a unity so perfect that it could only be described as a gift from God-- If every marriage were born of that vision, then there would be no need for divorce. The Pharisees want a legal ruling on whether or not divorce is allowed. But Jesus gives them a vision for what marriage is intended to be. A vision that he says is possible and available right now.

Of course, the church doesn't always represent Jesus that way. I know people whose pastors counseled them to stay in abusive marriages because, they said, Jesus opposes divorce. I've read theologians who say that those who go through divorce are always choosing sin regardless of the circumstances. I've listened to people describe the experience of the church community rejecting them when they were labeled, like a scarlet letter, with divorce. They turn Jesus' words about the grace of marriage that God makes possible into condemnation for individuals who find themselves in a relationship that isn't going to work.

If that's what Jesus had wanted to say then he would have just answered the question exactly as the Pharisees had asked it. No, God does not allow divorce. Those who divorce separate themselves from the community. Those who divorce are anathema. End of debate.

But remember that Jesus has just warned the disciples that the kingdom of God is not given to people who think they are greater than the people around them. Remember that Jesus has just warned the disciples that the kingdom of God is not given to people who try to stop other people from healing in Jesus' name because they're not under our control. Remember that Jesus has just warned the disciples that they should pay more attention to their own temptations from within than worrying about the problems of others' around them. Remember that Jesus says three times that you don't enter the kingdom as an adult who is blameless under the law. You enter the kingdom vulnerable and powerless as a child. You enter the kingdom through the generosity of God.

That is why when I read Jesus say that whoever divorces and then marries another commits adultery, I don't think Jesus is trying to replace one legal framework with another. And I'm don't think he's only speaking as one who believes that the apocalyptic times make it preferable for single people and those who divorce to stay that way.<sup>4</sup> And I sure don't think he's trying to suggest that those who fail in marriage one time are more likely to fail in it another.

I think he's making it clear that life in the kingdom of God is so unachievable through our usual modes of trying to reach perfection, that we are left with the clarity that only God's grace can bring that world to us or us into that world. We are left to face the stark truth of our humanity that most of us are law-breakers when it comes to the world that God has promised. This is the Jesus, after all, who in the next chapter will tell his disciples that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom. After all of Jesus' teaching

---

<sup>4</sup> This is closer to Paul's perspective on marriage. Jesus is less explicit although scholars rightly point out that Jesus never married, that the disciples apparently left behind spouses, and Jesus seemed to demote the importance of traditional family structures, despite contemporary claims to the contrary.

– the kingdom where the last of all enter first, where the powerless have a place, where marriage lasts, where the money can't buy you access – then the disciples will finally ask the right question - “Then who can be saved?” “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God,” Jesus tells them. “For God, all things are possible.” Most of us are law breakers when it comes to the world that God has promised. Law breakers who are deeply, deeply loved.

That is good news for all of us including those of us who've been through divorce. And it should cause the church to work harder on preaching, and reflecting, and living the generous love of God even and especially when our deepest dreams fail to blossom in the ways that we hope. It should cause the church to learn how to love each other in and through divorce instead of adding to those wounds by labeling or excluding or avoiding those who experience it.

That is the message Jesus has entrusted to the church. God receives us not because we are good, but simply because God chooses love. It is a message still too radical for the culture, often too radical for the church. Imagine if all of us really believed that the undocumented immigrant was no more of a law-breaker than the rest of us doing what we need to do to feed and clothe our families. Imagine if all of us really believed that God's love was as deep for the Iranian as for the American. Imagine if all of us really believed that God's love was as desperate for our worst enemy as it was for each of us. Maybe our hearts would focus less on who is worthy and celebrate the awe-inspiring embrace of the one who chooses to love us even on the cross. Maybe some other churches in the Christian family would spend less time debating whether or not divorced Christians should be welcome to the table and more time celebrating the grace of the one who makes it possible for any of us to be seated there.

Yesterday, at the retreat, we shared experiences of limitations in our own life that we had been forced to accept. One of us shared the experience of her parents' divorce and the limitations it had thrust upon her. As time passed she began to see that this troubling experience – was the ground on which a new foundation had arisen. Some of the very gifts that she treasured about herself had sprung from the ashes of this destruction.

That's my prayer for all of us who experience divorce. It's my prayer for all of us who experience life. Not a life of perfection, but a life of resurrection.