

“Back to Basics”
Mark 10:2-16
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20th Sunday after Pentecost / World Communion Sunday

We are carrying so much in this congregation at this moment in history. So much that I consider it a risk to say much of anything this morning at a time when we may be better off making space for listening. I felt this acutely coming out of worship last week. And then I turned to the lectionary, looking for wisdom, and saw that Jesus was teaching against divorce. After a few expletives, I held my nose and dived into what is likely no one’s favorite text, and saw again that Jesus is not really teaching against divorce. He is teaching *against* patriarchy and *for* a different kind of relationship between human beings – one marked by mutual accountability, care, and justice. I share that on the front end this morning destroying any hope of narrative surprise which is much more entertaining but only when people feel safe; safe that words that they hear from people on elevated pulpits – especially men on elevated pulpits – are not going to be used to hurt or harm. Hear now the good news from Mark’s Gospel:

[Mark 10:2-16]

There was no general rule in the first century outlining the rules under which someone could obtain a divorce,¹ which is probably why the Pharisees asked Jesus about it. It was a contested question. The kind the rabbis specialized in debating. During Jesus’ lifetime, different schools of rabbis answered this question in many different ways.² So it’s not surprising that Jesus would have been asked about it. What’s surprising is the approach Jesus takes in answering it. Rather than sticking with the Mosaic law of Deuteronomy 24, he turns back to Genesis and quotes a text that is less about the law and more about the basics of intimate human relationship. A man shall leave his family house, severing connections with his own patriarchal household, and the two persons shall become one flesh. Elizabeth Fiorenza says that when you translate the text with the wider context in mind, a better translation

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

² 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 Rabbis’ 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.

is – “the two persons – man and woman – enter into a common human life and social relationship because they are created as equals.”³

In other words to a question about a man’s right to divorce his wife, stated in those terms – a *man’s right* - Jesus responds with a text exposing the hierarchical assumptions of this reading of the law. He offers instead a different vision - rooted just as deeply in the Jewish tradition of interpretation - a vision of how God intended relationships from the beginning. He goes back to basics – the basic notion that human beings were not designed to wield power over and against one another. We were not designed to see one gender, or one race, or any other distinction of people as better than another. We were designed to love one another. And love between people presumes an equal footing, a standard respect, rooted in the reality that you are a child of God. I am a child of God. We are children of God together. Jesus takes us back to basics.

This equality by virtue of God’s image imprinted on each of us, is reinforced to the disciples when Jesus insists that it is just as possible for a woman to divorce her husband as for a man to divorce his wife, a radical, if not novel approach during Jesus’ lifetime. Divorce then, is not just a matter of legal rules and norms, as anyone who has actually been through a divorce knows. It is a profound tragedy – a tearing of a relationship that leaves both parties wounded. And yet, divorce must be an option, Jesus acknowledges, for a marriage that has already died.⁴

Even so, the wounds that we create when our most sacred relationships are torn cannot completely be left behind, as Jesus makes clear with his pronouncement about adultery. Some Christian traditions have turned this particular pronouncement into a legal prohibition against remarriage for those who are divorced. But to make this into another kind of “law” would go against the legalistic control that Jesus warns against. It could lead, in fact has led, to cruel judgment of people who have been through divorce instead of the very respect, care, and love that Jesus says all people deserve. Or it’s been leveled as a weapon in other ways, to exclude same gender relationships ignoring the fact that the center point of Jesus argument is that in the most intimate of relationships, responsibilities for care and respect and love and grace are the same for everyone.

Go back to basics, he tells us, and see that the relationships that we have with each other are what’s most important. The equality of all souls before God. The prerequisite for respect for each person that grows this central theological conviction. The belief that the laws and rules we create to govern these relationships must reflect this basic conviction.

Sometimes we need to go back to basics. This is one of those times. In a nation where 1 in 6 Americans is a victim of attempted or actual rape – 90% of those survivors beings women - we need to go back to basics and be held accountable to relationships of respect that human dignity requires.⁵ In a nation where the leader

³ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origin*, (New York: Crossroad), 1985, p. 143 quoted in Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, (Orbis), 1988, p. 265.

⁴ See Myers, *Binding*, p. 266.

⁵ RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network), <https://www.rainn.org/>.

of the free world ridicules a survivor of assault who had nothing to gain by testifying before a committee of mostly men, elevated above her, we need to be held accountable to the basic of human relationships of respect.⁶ We need to be held accountable for the conflicting messages that we send to young men about what it means to be men. We need to go back to basics.

And that's true for more than just this immediate, political moment that we are in. It's true for the church's internal relationships – internal to this congregation – but also internal for the global church. Decades ago, the church of the West started to come to grips with its own paternalistic, Eurocentric way of doing mission around the world. The way the church had confused the Gospel with Western culture and the destruction that has wrought on people around the world. We are a global church now. We seek to relate to people around the world not as “less developed” or “3rd world” but as siblings in the faith who know their own lands, their own people, their own struggles much better than we do. We're trying to get back to basics.

Getting back to basics is difficult, in part, because we all have to deal with the painful realities of where we stand in the structures and hierarchies that Jesus is dismantling on so many different levels. We have to deal with the gaps between the promises of the kin-dom that Jesus is inaugurating and the way we actually live our lives. It's painful to recognize that none of our congregation's international relationships can be completely horizontal because churches in North America have so much comparative wealth even with the troubles of the church. It's painful to recognize that the cherished notions of due process that Senator Collins appealed to so eloquently but incompletely on Friday haven't worked well for women who are survivors of assault just as they haven't worked well for Black people in their encounters with the criminal justice system.⁷ It's painful to acknowledge that those ideals that we all want work better for white people on the whole than for people of color; work better for men than for women; work better for American citizens than many others around the world. There are huge gaps between the kin-dom that Jesus promises and where we find ourselves in our families, our workplaces, our segregated communities.

I think this is why Jesus turns to children, for the second time in Mark's Gospel, to try to teach the disciples that getting back to basics is not something that you can will yourself into, it's not something that you create and control; it's something that you have to receive as a gift – a gift that God wants to give to you, that God is ready to give to us. A gift that comes when we relinquish our fears of losing control, our worry there is not enough to go around, our doubt that the world that Jesus has promised is getting closer or is even obtainable.

But that gift also comes with a warning to those who aren't interested in that gift; a warning to those who don't want to give up control, who only know unilateral, divisive power over others, to those who have sat so long at elevated tables, that they resent the idea of coming down below; a warning that while the world seems to

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/us/politics/trump-me-too.html>

⁷ <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/5/17943276/susan-collins-speech-transcript-full-text-kavanaugh-vote>

give its gifts to those who do control, and do master, and do dominate, and do disrespect - that world is passing away. God is upending it in favor of those who have been silenced, in favor of those who have been rejected, in favor of the least of these - a position occupied by children in the first century Greco-Roman world. They are the ones most able to easily receive this gift. We're invited to get back to basics and align ourselves with them.

True solidarity, after all, is only learned through action.⁸ And solidarity has become a subversive act at a time in our nation's history where we are encouraged to make enemies from those who are struggling instead of allies. Instead of tending to the real wounds of our sisters, men like me are encouraged to fear for our own futures. Instead of tending to the real wounds of people of color, white people are like are encouraged to protects our disproportionate slices of the pie. Instead of recognizing that protections for queer siblings don't take anything away from families like mine, heterosexual people like me are encouraged to somehow see ourselves as victims. Don't be fooled. This is the oldest trick in humanity's book. You can see this all through this section of Mark. Jesus speaks of the need to take up the cross and the disciples argue over who is the greatest. Jesus speaks of the healing that he is ushering in for all people and the disciples tell Jesus that they stopped someone from healing in Jesus' name because the healer wasn't working under the control of the disciples.

There is a better way. A much older way, from a different kind of book. Rooted in the knowledge that each and every human being is made in the image of God. We were given a vocation - to tend the land in partnership with each other. It's an old vocation that we can remember, that we can find again. It's time to go back to basics.

⁸ Thanks to community organizer Kathleen O'Toole for reminding me of this truth.