

Mark 10:2-16

You don't know how badly I wanted to just skip this gospel lesson and speak about Hebrews, however it is something that needs to be talked about. I have been divorced, as some of you may have been, and this is a very difficult passage for me to speak about. It brings up hurtful memories of my poor choices and painful past divorce. However, we don't live in the past, abiding by God's will in our present life is our focus. And I celebrate those of you who have been together for a lifetime through the good and the bad times. Still, I don't want you to think I advocate staying in a relationship that is physically, emotionally, or mentally abusive. That isn't healthy. A good marriage is like a pair of magnets drawing one another together, not pushing each other apart. Jesus wanted this for marriage partners, and he also wanted children and adults to work together as well.

To really look at this passage and get the most out of it we have to examine it closely. Even though Jesus is speaking hard words about divorce, he's also speaking about a shift from the language of law to the language of love. First, we need to consider where Jesus was geographically located with his disciples. That information came in the verse before the reading. This morning's reading began with verse 2; verse 1 tells us that Jesus and his disciples were in the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. This is important because Jesus is in the area where John the Baptist performed his ministry. John had been beheaded by Herod because John vehemently spoke out against Herod's marriage to his brother's wife Herodias. The King divorced his wife, and Herodias divorced her husband Phillip, the king's brother. By Roman law there was nothing wrong with this. By Jewish law it was wrong to marry a brother's wife when the brother was alive, and by marrying after divorce they were committing adultery. Divorces were easily granted by Jewish law, a woman was inconsequential, and if a man wanted to rid himself of her, he wrote a certificate of dismissal.

The Pharisees however were looking to find a reason to bring Jesus up on charges of treason. They wanted him to accuse Herod the way John had, ultimately causing his death. Instead, Jesus turned the table and asked them about Jewish law, which of course allowed a man to divorce his wife quite easily. But Jesus isn't concerned about the legal aspect of divorce, he is concerned about the law of love. In that day a woman could not survive without a man to support her and guard her. After being tossed out by her husband a woman could not lawfully be with another man, leaving her penniless, hungry, homeless, and without protection from those who would harm her. And their children would most likely have the same fate.

You may notice that I am only speaking of a man divorcing his wife whereas Jesus included both the man and the woman initiating divorce. Even though this scenario is depicted in Matthew and Luke as well, Mark is the only one including the mention of a woman divorcing a man. That's because Jewish law did not allow women to divorce their husband. However Jesus is referencing Roman law which did allow a woman to divorce her husband. So no matter which spouse initiated the divorce if either remarried they were committing adultery. This is very difficult to hear in today's world, yet sometimes a divorce is the only way to resolve a couple's differences, and a marriage to another person can be very fulfilling.

As God's own nature is three-in-one, so is the covenant of marriage. The couple make their vows before God. When God is included in the marriage, not just in the

wedding vows, but in the ongoing marriage, the marriage has a greater chance of succeeding. At one of the weddings I officiated the couple had purchased a wooden plaque with the Bible verse from Ecclesiastes 4:12, "a cord of three strands is not quickly broken." The original plaque, which was prominently displayed on an easel during the wedding ceremony, had three thick cotton cords hanging from it. During the wedding service the three of us, bride, groom, and myself (as a symbol of God), each took a cord and carefully braided the three together forming a three strand cord which is not easily broken. The braid bound the bride and groom together with God. The legal language of divorce is all about separation. The language of love is always about bonding.

What seems like the second half of today's reading takes place with only Jesus and his disciples, not the Pharisees. Perhaps they are having a time of rest and people are coming to them with their children, disturbing them. If you remember from the sermon two weeks ago, children were of no importance in those days, and today's reading shows us even the disciples didn't value the children. Yet their parents were bringing their children to Jesus. When Jesus heard his disciples turn the children away he told them to stop and to bring the children to him because "it was to such as these that the Kingdom belongs". People whom the world see as without value the kingdom of God values highly.

This pairing of what seems like two completely different readings brings us to the value of all people. Women were those who suffered from divorce and children suffered. Jesus takes the time to bless the children and tells his disciples that whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. That doesn't mean you had to be a child when you found Jesus. It doesn't mean that you have to be frivolous and spend all your time at play. It means that you need to be willing to admit you don't deserve what you are receiving. It's all about grace.

Grace is something we can not earn, nor do we deserve it. Grace is freely given to us because of what Jesus did in his death and resurrection. Children normally receive a gift gratefully and without being self-conscious; adults on the other hand are often filled with pride and shame when an unsolicited gift is given, thinking we don't deserve it, and often meaning what we say when we say, "You shouldn't have done that." When we consider the gift of grace we often feel as though it is something we don't deserve, that we aren't good enough. And that's true... we aren't good enough except for Jesus. Jesus allows us to receive the gift of grace, being loved and forgiven so that we are able to be in God's presence.

In *The Tales of the Pointless People* Daniel Erlander says that some human beings place a score on everything they do and try to accumulate points. Thinking that when they die if they have enough points on the board they will make it into heaven. However, God does not care about points. And neither should we. We cannot earn any points with God. Jesus has scored all of them, he has won. We don't need to keep track of our points to make it with God. And we don't get to judge how many points other people are worth or how many they will score. Jesus has scored them all, he has won. He has won our salvation. He can and will heal our brokenness and make our relationships new. All glory be to God.