

Mark 10:1-12

Safety First

March 8, 2020

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A colleague once told me a story about the reception following his very first sermon at the church he was called to right out of seminary. He began the story by saying, "She did not look like a Pharisee." He said the woman looked harmless enough. She looked like most of the other middle-aged women in a sea of people whose names he did not yet know. As she approached him, he assumed she was coming over to introduce herself and welcome him to the church. He extended his hand and began to form words like, "So great to meet you," but was stopped in his tracks as he heard the woman say, "Preacher, do divorced people go to hell?"

He said he almost dropped his fruit punch and was thinking to himself, "I've already passed my ordination exam. People shouldn't be allowed to surprise me with questions." His mind raced. "What class in seminary prepared me for this moment?" he thought. I could have answered that question for him...no class prepared him. Ministry is a series of events for which ministers are unprepared. Finally, he gathered himself and said, "Better people than me are divorced." He said she just looked at him and repeated her question, "Do divorced people go to hell?" So, he repeated his answer, which at the time, he says, he thought was clever.

Later, when he had the opportunity to visit with the woman in her home, she told him her son had recently divorced and was about to remarry. She was beside herself with worry about him and his relationship with God. You see, growing up, she had been taught that today's text was *eternally* bad news for anyone who was divorced (story based on *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, commentary on Mark 10:2-16, by David B. Howell, pp. 140-144, published by John Knox Press).

As this minister visited with the woman and really listened to her fear and pain, I hope he helped her understand what is really behind this text and what it has to say to us, in a world that is vastly different from the world in which Mark wrote. As I studied this week, and reflected specifically on the impact of this text on women, I remembered this picture of my friend's daughter, Lucy. It was taken a

couple of years ago. Lucy's onesie says, "Zero time for patriarchy." While we may not have time for patriarchy, it was the order of the day 2000 years ago.

Here is Mark 10:1-12:

10 He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them. ²Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" ³He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" ⁴They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." ⁵But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' ⁷'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

¹⁰Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

In today's text, Jesus and his disciples continue their journey to Jerusalem, traveling south from Capernaum and east across the Jordan River to Perea and eventually into Judea. The black arrows on the map loosely indicate Jesus' route. Along the way, crowds gathered around Jesus and he taught them. Once again, Jesus and his followers draw the attention of the Pharisees who Mark tells us ask him a question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" It's important to note that when Jesus responded to their question with a question of his own, "What did Moses command you?" the Pharisees, as we would expect, had no trouble answering it. They were, after all, experts in the law and tradition. The Pharisees asked Jesus a question, yet already knew the answer. It was a test. They wanted to force Jesus to take a stand on a controversial issue and therefore offend someone.

Jesus refused to be drawn into giving them a sound bite to be used against him. He turned the conversation with the Pharisees away from the legal foundation for divorce toward a perspective rooted in the importance God places on relationships and the way we treat other people. In the first century

Mediterranean world, divorce was a generally accepted part of life within the Jewish tradition and within the Greco-Roman culture. Among Jewish legal experts, Deuteronomy 24:1-4, the text the Pharisees referenced in their response to Jesus, was key. It deals not with whether or not divorce should occur, but with the details of the reality that it occurs. The text states that if a man becomes dissatisfied with his wife, he can give her a certificate of divorce and send her on her way. If she remarries and the next husband is dissatisfied with her, he can give her a certificate of divorce as well. The woman is never able to return to the first husband because, having married someone else, she is deemed defiled and apparently, according to the writers of Deuteronomy (not Moses) God doesn't like that.

The text mentions nothing about the man being defiled if he took another wife. It doesn't define "dissatisfied," which leads us to believe the man was able to decide when he was dissatisfied and act accordingly. It was fairly common for a man to decide another woman was more appealing because her parents had more money or because the other woman was prettier, or I don't know, made better bread, and that was enough. All he had to do was give her a certificate and the marriage was over. I believe Jesus' reference to Genesis with regard to the Pharisees' question was to make a very specific point: Marriage ought to be grounded in God's creative love and not in laws and certificates.

People who enter into marriage should know that just because there are laws that provide for the possibility of divorce doesn't mean that marriage should be considered temporary and that it's okay to treat another human being as if they are disposable. Jesus was less concerned with what was allowed and more concerned with what was intended. This was especially true with regard to the ways in which men treated women. In that patriarchal culture, as I've mentioned before, women were really vulnerable when they were unattached to a man. Jesus' strongest words in this text were against men who initiated divorce as a means to get something or someone else, sacrificing a woman to satisfy his own desires or ambitions.

According to Mark, when Jesus was away from the crowds and alone with his disciples, he further clarified his answer.

He said, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” While the Mosaic law in Deuteronomy assumes divorce would always be at the pleasure of the man, the author of Mark reflects the changing times and Greco-Roman culture by adding the bit about a woman divorcing a man. We can see that the interpretive trajectory of the text moves toward greater equality for and radical hospitality toward the ones who are vulnerable, in this case, the women. All people...women, children and men...no person is disposable as far as Jesus was concerned.

In January, a clergy friend and I were doing some planning for Lent. When I realized the scheduled texts for Lent skipped over a good portion of the Gospel of Mark and included texts set in Jerusalem *before* Palm Sunday when the story is about Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, I decided to choose different texts. When I told my friend that I was going to preach on today’s passage, he told me it was a terrible idea. He said there was no way to preach this text and not make people mad. I said, “Challenge accepted.” As I studied, it became clear to me that the things most upsetting to people about this text are things this text isn’t even about. So, I feel like I need to be clear about those things.

First, while same sex marriage is not upsetting to the people in this room, it is to some Christians. This passage has been used by some to say, “See male and female...that’s what biblical marriage is.” This text is not about same sex marriage and that is not what the Pharisees were asking about. It is about marriage of a man and a woman, which, at the time, was about economics and procreation. People did not marry because they fell in love. They married because it was mutually beneficial for both families involved, because women were seen as burdens to be unloaded on someone else, and because people died early, so babies needed to be made. People, including ministers, who use this text to say God did not intend marriage between same sex couples are badly misinterpreting it. It is about marriage between a man and a woman and other relationships are not on the horizon at all.

Second, the question the Pharisees asked was about men who, for any reason and for no reason, were legally allowed to discard women, which put them at great risk. Recall a few weeks ago when I mentioned John the Baptist’s death. He was killed because he dared to criticize Herod’s marriage to his brother’s former wife,

Herodias. In order to marry Herodias, Herod divorced another wife. In light of that, it's easy to see that the question Jesus was asked was politically motivated and had much more to do with the tension between Jesus and religious leaders than it did with everyday people getting a divorce.

In fact, the area beyond the Jordan in which Jesus was traveling, was one of Herod's territories and was likely where John was arrested. It's the area circled in red on the map. My point is, in the land of Herod, Mark wrote about Jesus addressing the selfish individualism of the Herodian court when he made his comments in answer to the Pharisees' question. Jesus was not telling a battered woman that she and her children had to risk physical and psychological torment every day in order to please God.

The opposite is true. Jesus' message with regard to relationships was always, "Safety First." God created human beings to be in relationship with one another. And in the kin-dom of God relationships are supposed to bring us closer to who we were created to be. They are supposed to keep us safe, not put us in danger. But so often they do. So often, human beings use other human beings for money, sex, control, status, until they are no longer useful and then they are discarded. This text sends a strong message to readers. That is not acceptable.

A marriage, or any relationship, that does not have as its foundation the belief that both people equally reflect the image of God, misses the mark. To be very clear, it is not "God's will" for you to stay in a relationship with someone who physically hurts you, who repeatedly says things that hurt or scare you, whose actions put your health and well-being at risk, who isolates and controls you, who lies to you, who keeps you from being who you were created to be. I understand there are many reasons people stay in relationships that are unhealthy. But because the Bible says so or because divorce is a sin, are not reasons based in reality. God wants you to be safe.

In the kin-dom of God, which Jesus came to reveal, human beings are created for relationships in which we are physically safe, our hearts are safe, and we feel safe to be our true selves, reflections of God in this world.

In Mark's story, Jesus doesn't have much time left. He is headed toward Jerusalem. The religious leaders are closing in, trying to get him to say something

dangerous. Mark's readers knew how the story ended and so do we. I like it that Mark imagined that Jesus would have used part of his time to say what he could to protect and lift up women. I believe if Jesus was here today, he would have "zero time for patriarchy." I appreciate the reminder for us that laws are not the ideal, they are a way of managing the reality that we don't always treat each other very well. That's why, in so many cases, Jesus seems to have higher expectations of our behavior than the legal experts of the day. It wasn't because Jesus wanted to have ever more stringent laws. It was because he wanted us to value each other, to protect each other, especially the most vulnerable among us. Let us allow this text to remind us that we were created for relationships that reflect God's love, both within the relationships and into the world. As we walk together through Lent, may we see that love all around us. Amen.