

OSLC Sermon 10 07 18  
Genesis 2:18-24; Mark 10:2-16

Grace to you and peace...

Ouch. As a woman who is both divorced and remarried, that's my reaction to the text in Mark's Gospel we just heard. Ouch.

Honestly, in the midst of the weight of our current public discourse, I really did not want to engage this text and the painful subject of divorce. But here it is, so we might as well have at it.

Speaking out of my own experience as well as the experiences others have shared with me I will tell you straight out: divorce is painful. No matter how necessary, no matter the circumstances, no matter who takes the initiative, divorce feels like ripping flesh. It's been ten years since I experienced the dissolution of my first marriage, and even as I am profoundly happy today I can still feel the ache that remains. Divorce is a kind of death.

We hear these words of Jesus regarding divorce and we can't help but be flooded with all the ways this text has been used as a weapon; first to heap shame on people who are divorced, but also to imply something "less than" about people who never marry. Even those working hard at maintaining a marriage relationship are put on notice about the consequences of divorce. None of us can hear this text and come away unscathed. The hard edge of the law comes through loud and clear. Is there any good news for us here?

The Pharisees come to "test" Jesus from their position within the religious structures of power and patriarchy. Their question is

specifically about divorce because it was a matter of controversy within Jewish law at the time. It was a hot button issue and they are trying to trap Jesus into saying something problematic. Remember, it was John the Baptist's critique of Herod's divorce and remarriage to his brother's wife that caused him to lose his head. To speak against the powers (political and religious) was (and is) risky business. They couch their question as though they were really curious about legitimate interpretations of the law, "is it lawful...?" when what they wanted was for Jesus to give a damaging answer they could hold against him.

As usual Jesus is not fooled, and refuses to engage in the game on their terms. Rather than debate the details Jesus turns the question back to them. "You already know the answer to what you are asking," Jesus seems to be saying; "What do you read in the law of Moses?" When they respond with what Moses allowed: that a man could write a certificate of dismissal and divorce his wife, Jesus points out the reason for this allowance. The Pharisees seek to debate a timeless, abstract teaching on marriage and Jesus calls out their very present and personal "hardness of heart." Then he uses scripture to interpret scripture. They have quoted Deuteronomy; Jesus returns to the origins of human relationships established in Genesis. Jesus quotes from the passage we have appointed as our first reading.

In a rather amusing account, God tries to find a suitable companion for the "earth creature" – formed of the earth and animated by the breath of God and not yet "gendered." One by one, as if on parade, God offers creature after creature to the human one, "animals of the field" and birds of the air," but none was found a helper as a partner, until finally God divides the earth

creature into two. Created not as subordinate, but of the very same substance, the two recognize their own wholeness in their companion.

It is this story that Jesus uses to counter the patriarchal entitlement of the Pharisees. Divorce, Jesus acknowledges, is permissible because of human frailty, but it is not God's desire or intention for human relationships. According to Jewish law at the time, a *man* could initiate a divorce from his wife, but a woman did not have that same power. Having received a certificate of divorce a woman would often find herself (and perhaps her children) without any rights or means of support. She would be outside the social stability of belonging to a man. So it is a radical turn Jesus makes when he expands the application of divorce to include both a man divorcing his wife *and* a wife divorcing her husband. Jesus is restoring the equality and mutuality between the genders as established in creation and holding both partners accountable to one another.

Far from establishing a new legalism, Jesus' concern is pastoral and relational. God would save us from all the brokenness which causes us deep suffering. Divorce is a reality that Jesus acknowledges, within which "the fundamental issue of justice must not be lost...Mark's gospel refuses to overlook the *actual* relations of power, no matter how "sacred" the institution."<sup>i</sup> In fact Jesus is upending the patriarchal social structure of the most basic unit of society – the family.

It is in this light that we can understand the seemingly random shift Mark's gospel makes to the people bringing children to Jesus. We can remember, though the disciples seem to have forgotten, Jesus' proclamation that "whoever welcomes a child in

my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me.” In this profound claim Jesus locates the very presence of God within the very last and least in society. In life, as in divorce, children are the most vulnerable and dependent, and it is exactly there that God may be found. No wonder Jesus is indignant at the disciples’ attempt to keep the children away.

Let the children come, says Jesus, for it is to such as these that the reign of God belongs. Unless we receive God’s reign as a child, we will never enter it. Simply put, we can never enter the reign of God by fulfilling “abstract legal principles, including those related to divorce and remarriage.”<sup>ii</sup> In Jesus’ time divorced women and children were among the most marginalized, neglected, and ignored. They represent those that society deems as the least important, the least valuable, the voiceless and the oppressed. In the self-righteousness of religious hypocrisy, then and now, the very ones God claims as central in God’s reign those in power count as nothing. “At the heart of this text is the disruptive work of God in Jesus Christ, which overturns patriarchal marital relationships and elevates those at the bottom of the social ladder (children) into models for entering the kingdom.”<sup>iii</sup>

The disruptive work of God in Jesus Christ is exactly that: disruptive. Even as we seek to follow Jesus as the revelation of God’s love and mercy at work in the world, we also experience the discomfort and distress of the disruption that is necessary to reveal the reign of God “on earth as in heaven.” As God reveals, breaks open, and breaks down our human systems of injustice

and oppression we can't help but feel the radical disorientation and seeming chaos that results.

As painful and ugly as our current political and social situation is, I see within it the disruptive work of God in Jesus Christ. The voices of the last and the least are being heard, and the powers are railing against them, struggling to maintain the entitlement and patriarchy that has been established for so long. Women are speaking the truth of what it is like to be vulnerable to a culture that says men matter more. Individuals that have been abused as children by those with authority in systems both religious and political are speaking out, telling their truth, and shaking the foundations of long established power. People trapped in poverty by an economic structure that systematically crushes them are no longer invisible. People of various gender identities and expressions are standing up to insist that they be recognized as fully part of humanity and worthy of dignity and respect. And even the despicable lashing out of racial bigotry and white entitlement that is such an embarrassment to people of good will is a matter of ripping away the veneer and telling the truth about the racism that exists at the heart of our national identity, which we can no longer deny.

It hurts to look at the suffering of humanity, and at the angry, violent insistence of the powerful struggling to maintain the control to which they feel entitled. But God is not stopped. In Christ the reign of God has come near and we are witnesses to its disruptive power. Change comes slowly and is often hard to see. But as MLK reminds us, "The arc of the moral universe is long, and it bends toward justice." We feel vulnerable, and afraid, and powerless. Like little children we long to be wrapped in the arms

of Jesus to receive his blessing. And it is precisely then that we are welcomed into the reign of God.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 266.

<sup>ii</sup> Charles L. Campbell, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 145.

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid.*