

Sunday Lesson – October 3, 2021

GOSPEL: Mark 10: 2-16



### Context

“Mark’s original readers probably found Jesus’ uncompromising statements about divorce and remarriage as challenging and counter-cultural as we do today. Divorce in the first century was a generally accepted part of life, both among Jews and perhaps more so within wider Greco-Roman culture. Some writers and public leaders spoke against divorce as bad for society, but for the most part people debated only details of its legal basis. Among Jewish legal experts, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was a key text, one that assumes divorce will occur and proscribes procedures for carrying it out. But other scriptures call the permissibility of divorce into question (see Malachi 2:13-16; Genesis 2:24).

The Pharisees who ask Jesus about divorce do so “to test” him. The scene, through 10:9, therefore proceeds as a confrontation in which Jesus shows the Pharisees to have misunderstood scripture. More precisely, they misunderstand God’s design and misuse scripture and interpretive traditions to justify their errors (compare 7:6-13).” (*Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-27-2/commentary-on-mark-102-16-2*)

### Insight

“Jesus turns the conversation with the Pharisees away from the legal foundation for divorce to God’s design for marriage. That is, he dismisses the law (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) as a concession to human weakness and offers a different perspective rooted in creation (quoting Genesis 1:27; 2:24). His brief argument describes marriage as a strong and (literally) unifying bond between two people. It is because he sees marriage in such a way that he speaks against divorce as he does.

Technically speaking, Jesus *implies* that he disapproves of divorce. More plainly, he says that divorce contravenes God’s design as expressed in Genesis 1-2. Later, with his disciples, he reveals more specifics, saying that a person who initiates a divorce to marry another person commits adultery. In all this, Jesus radicalizes the demands of scripture to a point perhaps far beyond where any Pharisee would have taken it. To explore the meaning of this passage, we need to consider how Jesus makes his case and what he aims to accomplish by it.

Jesus describes marriage with utmost seriousness, as something that transcends contractual obligations and economic utility, as something rooted in human identity. This offers a sharp reproof to any who would construe marriage as a contract of convenience, casually formed and casually broken. It impels churches to promote and foster healthy marriages, and in the case of divorce and remarriage to extend compassion and facilitate healing.” (*Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-27-2/commentary-on-mark-102-16-2*)

### Gospel Reading

“From there he went to the area of Judea across the Jordan. A crowd of people, as was so often the case, went along, and he, as he so often did, taught them. Pharisees came up, intending to give him a hard time. They asked, “Is it legal for a man to divorce his wife?” Jesus said, “What did Moses command?” They answered, “Moses gave permission to fill out a certificate of dismissal and divorce her.” Jesus said, “Moses wrote this command only as a concession to your hardhearted ways. In the original creation, God made male and female to be together. Because of this, a man leaves father and mother, and in marriage he becomes one flesh with a woman—no longer two individuals, but forming a new unity. Because God created this organic union of the two sexes, no one should desecrate his art by cutting them apart.” When they were back home, the disciples brought it up again. Jesus gave it to them straight: “A

man who divorces his wife so he can marry someone else commits adultery against her. And a woman who divorces her husband so she can marry someone else commits adultery.” The people brought children to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus was irate and let them know it: “Don’t push these children away. Don’t ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. Mark this: Unless you accept God’s kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you’ll never get in.” Then, gathering the children up in his arms, he laid his hands of blessing on them.” The Message

### **What It Could Mean?**

“Some texts in the Bible, both in the Hebrew and New Testament canons, have been called “texts of terror.” Usually, these are texts that scholars consider to be hurtful to contemporary sensibilities. Although every text has the potential to become a “text of terror,” Mark 10:2-16 has not traditionally been considered within this category. Asked by the Pharisees whether it is legitimate for a man to dismiss his wife, Jesus advocates for a theology that reinforces the durability of the marital bond. Mark 10:9 has often been interpreted as the indissolubility of marriage in a way that has led different theological traditions to ban the possibility of divorce. And yet, it is undeniable that many believers feel at odds, hurt, targeted, even traumatized by how preaching tackles this text. For many Christians, particularly women, the way this text has informed their respective theological traditions has meant that they have felt forced to stay in abusive relationships or kept in a marital contract that eventually becomes the major obstacle to their personal fulfillment, a deterrent to embodying a more comprehensive Christian belonging.

Nothing in the text compels contemporary interpreters to see Jesus’ teaching as an eternal moral code with universal applicability. Instead of reading passages like this as a “rule

book,” as a set of injunctions and prohibitions on how to experience and codify marriage, this pericope is a test case for our ability to read Scripture otherwise. Some options include interpreting Jesus’ teachings as depicted in Mark alongside the experience of contemporary victims, reading Mark in contrast with the other Synoptics and with Paul’s rather tepid position on marriage. Also, we could frame Jesus’ sayings within Jesus’ practice around marriage and his demands on his closest disciples or appreciate the creative ways in which first-century communities conceptualized the institution. Even, as a final suggestion, we could take inspiration from the fact that Jesus’ strengthening of the Mosaic Law could have resulted in protecting women who could have been dismissed by their husbands, particularly when those women had few options available.” (*Excerpts from workingpreacher.org; Revised Common Lectionary by Luis Menéndez-Antuña*)

### **Readings for Further Study**

- [Genesis 2:24/Matthew 19:5/Ephesians 5:31](#) “*The two will become one flesh*”
- [Malachi 2:16/Matthew 19:8](#) *God’s desire in marriage*

### **Thought for the Day**

“Do not think that love in order to be genuine has to be extraordinary. What we need is to love without getting tired. Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies.” ~ Mother Teresa

### **A Prayer**

God, help us be gracious to one another regarding areas where we are very different. Assist us to appreciate that we don’t need to have the same personality or the same preferences in everything. Help us recognize that a happy relationship is one in which the other person completes you – and often that requires different strengths, different abilities, and different ways of looking at things. Teach us to accept the other for the wonderful person they are. Amen.