

“A Sticky Wicket”

Mark 10:2-16

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Mark 10:2-16 (NRSV)

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ He answered them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ They said, ‘Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, “God made them male and female.” “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’

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

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Prayer.

I just love preaching on this passage, I say with my tongue in cheek.

I can't be any more honest than this, that our passage from Mark, with Jesus teaching on divorce, creates a sticky wicket for 21st century Christians. I had lunch with a dear friend and colleague this past Friday, who was finding great difficulty in wrestling with this hermeneutical challenge. “Just what was Jesus thinking?” she asked. “What do we tell the people in the pews, when a sizable portion of the people have been through divorce? Especially those whose previous relationships may have been filled with violence, oppression, or betrayed trust?”

Before we jump to any conclusion, lets back up for a moment and focus upon what we know.

First, consider the *sitz en liben*, or, the context of this passage. The Pharisees are intent on destroying Jesus. What they are seeking is if Jesus would say something contradictory to the Law, which they know by heart and believe to be true. This would give them sufficient evidence to have him arrested and his ministry ended. So they ask him a question that they know the answer: 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'

Jesus has no intention of being arrested prematurely. He has on two previous occasions in the Gospel of Mark taught his disciples about his forthcoming passion, death, and resurrection. It was going to happen according to his terms, timing and needs. It was not going to happen preemptively, prematurely, or contrary to His Father's will.

Jesus knows the answer their motives. He knows what they are seeking, but an opportunity presents itself. So he puts it back into their court: "What did Moses command you?" "They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.'"

Technically, their answer from the 24th chapter of Deuteronomy is correct. But if you read it over carefully, it is obvious to even the casual reader that the Pharisees take this verse out of context and incorrectly apply it to all incidences of divorce. The context of Deuteronomy 24, verses 1 through 4, is if a woman does not please her husband, he is able to write a certificate of divorce. If she marries another and her second husband is not pleased, or dies, then it is not permitted for her to return to her first husband, for that would bring guilt to the people God has blessed.

Taking a scripture passage out of context and using it for your own ends is called "Proof Texting." This strategy was a violation of Holy scripture two thousand years ago, and it remains a violation today.

The Pharisees answer is a typically male response, which is reflective of a male dominate, authoritarian perspective of the Old Testament Law. All the power is given to the man. No power, self-determination, or authority is given to the woman. It is as if she has no value, no say, control, no status; it is as if she were property or a slave. Indeed, this is how women were treated in the time and culture of Jesus.

This is the opportunity that presents itself! This becomes the effort of Jesus – to confront the injustice inflicted against women by male authorities and an organized religion whose motive was self-perpetuation, not faithfulness, not righteousness, nor holy living.

“Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he (that would be Moses) wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, “God made them male and female.” “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” So they are no longer two, but one flesh.'”

Jesus elevates the position and status of women to equal that of men, correctly righting the Pharisees' wrong interpretation of the Law of Moses, perpetuated by the very ones entrusted with the stewardship of legal purity.

God made them male and female, each in *Imago Dei*, each in the image of God. They are no longer two, but one. Equal in every way.

In hockey language, Jesus “shoots and scores.”

What else do we know? Consider the point Jesus makes to finalize the concern “what God has joined together, let no one separate.” At a later time, away from the threat of the Pharisees, in a much more safe environment, Jesus concludes with his disciples, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

The guilt of adultery is now equally shared. It is no longer always the guilt of the woman, as it is implied by the Law of Moses from Deuteronomy. With Jesus, guilt for adulterous behavior is an equal responsibility of both husband and wife, and guilt is correctly laid at the feet of the offender. Guilt is correctly laid at the feet of the offender.

There is more here than meets the eye.

It may be a narrow interpretation on my part, but I believe that it is completely justifiable that this statement – “what God has joined together, let no one separate” - this statement does not preclude the future action of God, which may be to initiate the permanent separation of a husband and wife for God's good purposes. While humankind may not initiate the separation, God may take that initiative, especially in cases of spousal abuse and violence, unjustly inflicted by one partner upon another.

The intention of Moses' adultery laws is to maintain the integrity of the faithful community, to prevent families from being destroyed, to build healthy relationships and to keep them nourished. Adultery violates families and it hurts

children. Adultery breaks down trust; it doesn't build it up. This is why, I believe, Jesus says what he says in regards to adultery and divorce. Whoa to the one who attempts to separate those whom God has joined together.

As far as I am concerned, as long as one is acting according to God's will, these words of Jesus gives assurance to those seeking divorce, due to a violation of trust, abuse or violence. If it is God's will, then God is the primary actor, initiating the separation. If it is God's will due to violence or abuse, then it is not you, but God working through you, that brings about separation.

Of course, there is always the question of God's will or human desire. I'll leave that up to you and your God. I can't, and won't be the judge of that. If your motive is of the flesh, if it is not pure in any way, shape, or form, you will have to answer to a higher judge, the Lord Almighty at some future point. The last one you have to worry about is little old me!

Finally, we know that serious disciples of Christ must evaluate this narrative, and all Gospel narratives, while at the same time, considering Jesus' larger ministry, which sought out the marginalized, the poor, the diseased, the last, the lost, the least; including women, and children. Jesus heals a hemorrhaging woman, raises from the dead the daughter of another, cast out demons from the child of a third. Jesus speaks with a divorced woman at Jacob's well in the fourth chapter of John, discerns her broken nature and loss, and offers her the gift of living water.

Obviously, Jesus is not condemning those who are divorced. He has far more important fish to fry.

Jesus is concerned with larger items than condemnation. He is concerned with building the Kingdom of God. He came to complement the Law of Moses with the Grace of God. He comes to right the wrongs of injustice, violence, and poverty. He comes to bring people to repentance, to grant forgiveness, and to save us into eternal life.

When we consider all the evidence, and focus upon what we know, this passage of Jesus about divorce, takes on new meaning. The focus is upon elevating the status of women and children, equalizing the burden of guilt regarding adultery and divorce, and not allowing the focus of Jesus' life, passion, death, and resurrection to be wrongly stolen.

Dearly beloved, if you believe the Gospel, you know that it is not Jesus' intention to condemn the world. It is that the world might be saved through him. The Word of the Lord. Amen.