

***Women and Children Count Too***  
**A Sermon on Mark 10:1-16**  
**World Communion Sunday**  
**October 7, 2018**

**Introduction**

It is World Communion Sunday. We are celebrating the unity of Christians all over the world. And the lectionary gives us Jesus' teachings about divorce.

This is a difficult text for ministers to preach. More than half of the members of our congregation have been divorced, myself included. The divorce rate among ministers is higher than the divorce rate among the laity. Ministers tend to marry the church and neglect their families.

Psychologists would disagree with the traditional reading of this text. There is nothing healthier than a bad marriage. Many couples are incompatible and they would be better off without each other.

So how do we hear any good news in this text? If we dig deeper, we may just find that Jesus' difficult sayings about divorce actually complement the theme of World Communion Sunday.

**First Move: Testing Jesus**

Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem. We can almost hear the threatening music playing in the background. In Jerusalem Jesus will be handed over, crucified and rise again. Today he leaves Galilee and enters Judea.

The crowds gather round Jesus. He begins to teach them, as he was accustomed to do. The Pharisees also approach Jesus. They ask him a question about divorce *to test him*.

Once Jesus gets to Jerusalem in Mark's gospel, the Pharisees will get together with the Herodians to test Jesus by asking a question about paying tribute to Caesar. The Herodians are supporters of Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee who beheaded John the Baptist. Antipas taxed the Galileans heavily to pay for his massive building projects. The peasants hated the taxes. The Pharisees hoped to force Jesus to take sides, either way, he would lose. Either he would lose support with the peasants by telling them to pay the tax or he would be arrested for telling them not to pay the tax.

Something similar is going on in today's text. The Pharisees ask Jesus, "Is it permitted for a husband to divorce his wife?"

This is a strange question to ask. There was no debate among Israelites as to whether divorce was permitted. The only debate was over what were the proper grounds for divorce. The leading text on divorce in the Hebrew Bible is Deuteronomy 24:1-4. A man could give a woman a certificate of divorce if he found her objectionable. The debate in first-century Judaism was, what does objectionable mean? Conservatives thought that it could only mean adultery. Liberals thought a man could divorce his wife if she displeased him for any reason. If the Pharisees were interested in debating the meaning of Scripture, you would expect them to ask Jesus what were legitimate grounds for divorce.

New Testament scholars don't have a very good answer for why the Pharisees are asking this question. Many of them say that Jesus had a radical position on divorce and the Pharisees knew it. But they don't have a good answer for how they were testing Jesus with this question.

Some scholars suggest that Jesus saw divorce as a practice of the elites. The divorce rate among Romans was over 50%. It was much lower for Galileans in the countryside.

By testing Jesus with the question, the Pharisees may have been hoping that he would criticize Herod Antipas. Jesus has just moved into Herod's territory. Herod's divorce is the only divorce that is mentioned in the Gospel of Mark. Herod's first wife was a foreign princess. He married her for political reasons. He divorced her and married his brother's wife, Herodias. He married her for lust. John the Baptist criticized Herod's marriage to Herodias and he got beheaded for it. John is a forerunner for Jesus in Mark's gospel. John is handed over to the authorities and executed, just as Jesus will be. The Pharisees may be hoping that Jesus will be arrested immediately if he answers the question by criticizing Herod.

Jesus instead answers a question with a question, "What did Moses command?" The Pharisees replied, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and divorce her." The Pharisees are quoting from Deuteronomy 24.

Jesus said, "It is because of your hardness of heart that Moses wrote this commandment for you. It violates God's intent for creation."

The Greek word for hardness of heart is σκληροκαρδία. It is the root of the English word *sclerosis*, which means hardening of the arteries. We think of hard hearted as meaning that you are cold, you lack compassion. Not so in the ancient world. The heart was considered the the seat of our desires, the seat of our will. Hardness of heart means hardness of will. Hard hearted could be translated as hard headed today. Your will resists God's will. Jesus is saying that your will violates God's will for creation.

Jesus goes back to the creation story in Genesis 2. Jesus says that God's vision in creation is for people and animals to live in harmony. A man will leave behind his father and mother and will be faithfully devoted to his wife. Just as God is one, the man and the woman will be one flesh. They are no longer two but one flesh.

Jesus is quoting one part of Scripture against another. This is something that we don't see anywhere else in the Gospels. Many scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was written in Galilee. Richard Horsley, a New Testament scholar, says that the Galileans had only been under the rule of Judea for about 100 years. Before that Galilee, which was in the Northern Kingdom, and Judea, which was in the Southern Kingdom, were conquered by different foreign empires. Deuteronomy is a retelling of the Moses story; scholars believe it was written in large part by priests in Jerusalem. Deuteronomy may not have been part of the Scripture in Galilee while it was separated from Judea. Part of the hostility to the Pharisees in the Gospels is that they were headquartered in the Southern Kingdom; their fame was as interpreters of the Law. Horsley believes there is a regional rivalry at play in the Gospel of Mark, the Galileans against the Judeans. Jesus represented the Galileans and the Pharisees represented the Judeans. Mark is describing Jesus as a local hero.

Jesus stands up to the test. He responds to a question about divorce by criticizing Herod's divorce and remarriage in code language, and he uses Scripture that was recognized in Galilee to overcome the arguments of the smooth interpreters of Scripture from Judea.

## **Second Move: Everybody Counts**

Jesus also makes a deeper point about what life is like in the kingdom of God. Marriage was not a sacrament until several centuries later. Polygamy was still permitted under Jewish law. Marriage contracts were property contracts. They set forth the dowry that would be paid to the man for marrying the woman. Jesus is saying, No, marriage is a sacred relationship. Two people are brought together in a sacred covenant. Marriage ceremonies today use this covenant language: the marriage covenant is like our covenant with God. Two partners should be faithful to each other, just as God is always be faithful to us.

Jesus goes into the house to teach the disciples in private. The disciples ask again about divorce and Jesus says, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if after she divorces her husband she marries another, she commits adultery."

Whenever we see the teaching of Jesus explained in the gospels, that is a sign that it is the evangelist speaking not the historical Jesus. Jesus taught in aphorisms,

not legalisms. Aphorisms are short, pithy sayings that tease our brains. Jesus left his audience to figure out the meaning for themselves.

Legalisms can do great damage. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “Turn the other cheek.” That is a creative response to violence that the oppressor is not expecting. Priests and ministers over the centuries have literalized turn the other cheek by counseling women to return to their abusive husbands and submit to them. Literalizing the Gospels turns good news into bad news.

The children were approaching Jesus so that he might touch them, give them a blessing. The disciples rebuked them. The disciples were displaying the hardness of their hearts.

Jesus saw this and got angry. He said to them, “Allow the children to come to me, do not hinder them, for of these is the kingdom of God.”

Last weekend I attended a Jesus Seminar on the Road in Wichita. Arthur Dewey, one of the leading historical Jesus scholars, said that the historical Jesus intended to do damage in our heads.

Jesus is challenging the way that people looked at the world in the first century. They thought of society as a pyramid with elites at the top. There was no middle class. Everyone else was at the bottom. Their thinking was dominated by the concept of limited good. It is a closed system. Modern people think of the pie as expanding through economic growth. Synergy creates something new. This was foreign to the ancients. The pyramid never expands. New value comes into the system only from the gods. Grace is a translation of the Greek word, *χάρις*. The primary meaning is benefit. Benefits from the gods flowed only to the elites at the top of the pyramid. People at the bottom shared into those benefits only by entering into a patronage relationship with the elites at the top. They pledged their loyalty and service to the elite in return for benefits.

Jesus blows up this model. He says, “God causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous.” God’s benefits flow to everybody, even women and children.

Chapter 22 in the Gospel of Thomas replaces the ancient model with a radically different model of reality. This may be a more accurate reflection of what the historical Jesus said about the place of children in the kingdom and about man and woman’s becoming one flesh:

Jesus saw some babies nursing. He said to his followers, “These nursing babies are like those who enter the kingdom.”

They said to him, “Then shall we enter the kingdom as babies?”

Jesus said to them, “When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male, nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter [the kingdom].”

Translation by Marvin Meyer.

This is unitive thinking. It cannot be reduced to legalism. How do you draw a model with the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner?

Jesus lifts up children in Mark and nursing babies in Thomas—they receive the kingdom as a gift, they understand the true nature of the kingdom.

Mark’s story ends when Jesus lays hands on the children and blesses them. The Greek word is *κατευλογέω*. It has the same root as our word for *eulogy*. To eulogize someone is to praise or bless them. Jesus calls down God’s blessing or praise on the children. The story ends with a benefit from God.

### **Third Move: Sacred Relationships**

Mary and I went to Regional Assembly in Indianapolis in 2009. Sharon Watkins, our General Minister and President, was leading communion. She was telling the story in Mark’s gospel about the feeding of the 5,000. The text says that there were 5,000 men, not counting women and children. Sharon said, “And we’re going to count the women and children.”

Jesus is telling his disciples that marriage is a sacred relationship. We miss the point by preaching against divorce. The focus of the text is on uplifting the sacred relationships in marriage and in family. Sacred relationships add new value to our lives. They are benefits from God.

My favorite theologian is my wife, Mary. In our wedding vows, she said that I was a gift from God. [Nobody had ever told me before that I was a gift from God.] That until we got married, she had seen gifts from God as a rain forest, the ocean, the sunrise, the stars in the night sky. Now she was adding me to the list. That gifts from God should be treasured and protected. And that she would treasure and protect me.

Jesus recognizes that this is an ideal. Until the kingdom arrives, we will have hard hearts. People may marry for the wrong reasons. Herod married for political gain and for lust. People still marry for the wrong reasons today. People may stop seeing their spouse as a gift. After they live with them for a while, they may seem more like a curse. Divorce is allowed because of hard hearts, substituting our will for the will of God, marrying the wrong person for the wrong reasons.

Hard hearts also cause pain within marriage, without leading to divorce. Marriage can become a battle of hard hearts, my will against yours. It degenerates into a power struggle.

A married couple is one flesh. God has joined them together. They complement each other in an essential way. They create something new, a sacred relationship.

A covenant is based on a promise to put the relationship first. You don't put the other person first. You don't have to be submissive. That would be unhealthy. But you shift the center of your focus from yourself to the marriage. You ask yourself every day, How will what I am doing and what I am saying affect our marriage? When you are sacrificing or giving up things, it is not for the other person, it is for the marriage.

Joseph Campbell, a historian of world religions, says, "Marriage is not a love affair; it is an ordeal." If you think of it like that, you will be able to survive. The ordeal is to sacrifice your ego for the relationship. There is no power struggle. Each of you is serving the relationship. The two of you will become one.

There is joy in that, too. You will be sharing your life with someone who shares the same commitment, with someone who loves you unconditionally. You will become something greater than you are right now. You are part of a sacred relationship. You will see yourself transformed. The marriage will unhardened your heart.

## **Conclusion**

Maybe the lectionary does tie into World Communion Sunday. When we are disciples of Christ, we become something new. We become part of the body of Christ. We enter into holy relationship with the other parts of the body of Christ.

On World Communion Sunday, we celebrate the sacred relationship we share with each other through Christ.