

The Test
 First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee
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Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" **3** He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" **4** They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." **5** But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. **6** But 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, **8** and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. **9** Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

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

13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. **14** 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. **15** Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." **16** And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

THE RECEPTION

A pastor wrote about a reception welcoming him to the church as pastor.

He wrote,

"She didn't look like a Pharisee.

She appeared harmless: a flowered print dress, short in stature, glasses too large for her rounded face.

I thought she was going to welcome me to the church.

It was the reception at my very first pastorate.

I extended my hand as she approached, opened my mouth—but before I could say anything she said,

‘Preacher do divorced people go to hell?’

Almost dropping my fruit punch, I thought,

‘I just passed my ordination exam.

What is this? Another test of some sort?’

I raced through my mind’s data bank for something I had learned in pastoral care to get myself off the spot.

Finally, I spoke, ‘Better people than me get divorced.’”

She apparently didn’t like that answer because she asked the question again.

“Preacher, do divorced people go to hell?” When the young pastor feebly offered the same response, she turned on her heels and walked away.

THE TEST

Welcome to the ministry young man.

If you’re going to serve in the name of Jesus you’re going to get some tough questions. And many of those questions are designed to get us into trouble.

For example, suppose someone asked you, “What is your position on abortion?”

No matter how you answer that question you are going to alienate a good number of people in the room.

Feelings run deep on that question.

The same is true of the question asked in our lesson for today. Some questions are meant to test us.

The Pharisees came to Jesus to “test” him, and their question was this, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

This was a “gotcha” question.

The Pharisees really didn’t want to know what Jesus thought about divorce (or any other topic for that matter). Their sole purpose was to test Jesus in order to discredit him.

This is a common theme in Mark's gospel.
Often the religious leaders come to Jesus in order to test him.

"Jesus, if a woman marries seven brothers, whose wife will she be in heaven?"
(Mark 12:23)

"Jesus, give us a yes or no answer. We're curious about your position on this.
Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (Mark 12:14)

Gotcha questions, the political and religious leaders are full of them. And today's gotcha question is about divorce.

For the Pharisees the answer to this question is straightforward. Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? Of course!

Any rabbi worth his salt could tell you that it's in the Bible. In Deuteronomy 24 the grounds for divorce are clear. If the wife doesn't please her husband or if he finds something objectionable about her, she can be sent off. The only question was: how bad did the offense have to be before she was sent away?

HARD HEARTS

Jesus answers their question, but as usual his answer reframes the debate.

Jesus points out that Moses did allow a man to divorce his wife. But, this was only allowed because of their "hardness of heart."

So, strictly speaking it was legal for a man to divorce his wife. But, that didn't make it right.

That's why Jesus directs their attention to Genesis.

Questions of marriage and divorce are not just about what is legal. Questions of marriage and divorce strike at the heart of what it means to be created in the image of God.

We were created for relationship.
And when relationships are broken, especially important relationships like marriage, our connection to the divine is weakened.

The marriage relationship in particular is the foundation of the family.
It is a precious gift.
It is sacred.

When I preside at a wedding ceremony, I end it by having the bride and groom join hands. I place my hand on theirs and I use the words found in today's Scripture,

"Those whom God has joined together, let no one separate."

JUSTICE FOR THE LITTLE ONES

Yes, some marriages do end in divorce.

But, we do not begin our discussion by asking under what circumstances divorce is legal. We begin our discussion by talking about the high cost of divorce.

In Jesus' day divorce was typically a legal convenience for the man. The woman lost pretty much everything ... status, reputation, economic security ...you name it.

In light of that Jesus asked the religious leaders,

"How can you talk about divorce as if were a topic for debate or a convenience? God's law is meant to protect the the least among us. But, you have turned it into a legal excuse to be heart hearted and cruel. "

The Pharisees ask the question about divorce to trick Jesus, to trip him up. But, Jesus reminds us that there is a deeper questions than just the legal one.

Our most important relationships are not founded upon the law. Our most important relationships are founded upon love and mutual dependance.

"Yes, a man may divorce his wife.
God recognizes that human beings fall short of the ideal and makes allowances for that reality.

But that's not the end of the story.

What about those who are broken by this process?

What is our stance and what is our responsibility to these broken ones as a community of faith?

Jesus changes the focus from rules to relationship.

Our faith inspires us to treat all our relationships as sacred expressions of God's grace.

The question we ask when it comes to marriage (and all the other relationships in our life for that matter) is not: "Is it legal?"

The question we ask is: "Is it loving?"

We love God by protecting those who are most vulnerable.

We express our love for God by taking care of the "little ones" in our life.

THE "LITTLE ONES" THEME

Mark's gospel makes this point repeatedly.

The kingdom of God does not come through might and power. The kingdom of God comes through self-sacrifice, service and lifting up those who are downtrodden.

Over these past few weeks we've discussed this same theme in various settings.

Jesus announces his intention to go to Jerusalem to die, and the disciples respond by arguing about who's the greatest. Jesus tells them that to be great is to serve, and that means welcoming into your life those who are vulnerable.

And he gives them an example.

He puts his arms around a little child and says that when you welcome one of these little ones you welcome and honor God.

You'll remember that in the ancient world children had the least power and status. They were the epitome of those who are vulnerable and helpless. But, in Jesus' world children become important symbols of the Kingdom of God.

Last week we talked about the seekers.

Those seeking Jesus and healing in his name were also identified as "little ones."

And Jesus warned his disciples that they would be judged harshly if they prevented those little ones from coming to him.

In this week's lesson the little ones are women who suffer great injustice under divorce laws that favor men.

THE KINGDOM BELONGS TO CHILDREN

And then to tie it all together we come back to another story about the little children.

In this scene folks bring their children to be blessed by Jesus. But, the disciples try to stop them.

Jesus is incensed.

Will these disciples never learn?

He tells the disciples to let the little children come to him.

The kingdom of God belongs to the little children.

Once again the little children symbolize all those who are vulnerable.

The little children symbolize all those who are at risk.

The little children symbolize all those who are in need.

The kingdom of God does not belong to the strong, the wealthy, or the powerful.

The kingdom of God belongs to the children.

A COMMUNITY FOR BROKEN PEOPLE

God's kingdom is made up of people who are open and honest about their weaknesses. And through their vulnerability they find common ground with each other and with Jesus.

To put it another way, the church is a place where those who are broken by life come to experience the sacrificial love of God in Christ. God in Christ meets us in our weakness.

In a community filled with broken people, we find the grace of God through the One whose body was broken and blood was shed. This is so contrary to ways of the world that we have to take communion often to remember how different we are when compared to the world.

We cannot be filled with pride when we remember that the one who saved us gave his life for us ... and calls us to follow in his footsteps. After all, he bids all his disciples to take up a cross and follow him. We too are called to deny ourselves for the sake of the kingdom.

Pride has a hard time living in that kind of kingdom.

The Apostle Paul tried to drive this point home to a proud congregation in Corinth. In essence he told them,

“Don’t pretend that you’re strong. Tell the truth about your weakness. It is in your weakness that you find true strength.”

And then he reminded them of what things were like when they were called to be Christians. He wrote,

“Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise;
 God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;
 God chose what is low and despised in the world ... so that no one might boast in the presence of God”

(I Corinthians 1:26-29).

Don’t be embarrassed by your weakness.
 Don’t be afraid to express your need.

We’re all in the same boat.
 We are all broken in some way.
 We have all failed in some significant way.

But, by God’s grace we are called to a community where weakness is transformed.

Body broken and blood shed become a sign and seal of salvation. We are loved. We enter a relationship with God’s little ones, and through those relationships we find the Spirit of God in Christ.

The drama of salvation is not only played out in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It is also played out in our own lives.

Broken people become the vessels of God's salvation. We, the foolish and the weak, carry the message of God's wisdom and strength.

WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

Today is World Communion Sunday.

Today people all over the world take the Lord's Supper and remember that the sun never sets on the kingdom of God. God in Christ loves the world, the whole world. We have family, brothers and sisters all over this world

And God is determined that no one in this world be excused from this family. God is determined that no one be given a certificate of divorce and sent on their way.

God and God's people are in the business of rounding up lost sheep.
God and God's people are in the business of healing broken relationships.

Leftovers don't remain scattered on the hillside.

And disciples who deny and run away aren't condemned to hell. They are welcomed back home

In God's kingdom we are in the business of lifting people up who have fallen because we know what it's like to fall.

We too have fallen, but by the grace of God we have been restored. The kingdom of God is for children just like us.

Amen.