

sermon-10/4/09 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Scripture’s Impossible Ideals”  
Mark 10:2-16

This passage in Mark is one of those texts that has been misunderstood or misused down through Christian history. It has caused pain and guilt for those who have been divorced, even when the divorce was necessary or justified. We can learn from this passage only if we take into consideration its context.

First, note how the story begins. The Pharisees come to Jesus to put him to the test. Mark wants us to see the Pharisees as playing the tempter’s role, trying to trap Jesus like they did when they asked him about taxes, or what happens in the afterlife.

They were trying to get Jesus to pick a side in the debate of that day about what grounds justified divorce. Either way Jesus answered their question he would alienate half the people. Thus, Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees is his clever way of avoiding their trap. It was not, therefore, a comprehensive answer about divorce, nor Jesus’ last word on that subject.

Note, as well, this passage does not deal with our modern issue of homosexual marriages or civil unions. The question asked to him was about a man and a woman. Jesus deals with that situation. He says nothing about gay and lesbian relationships. Consequently, those who use this passage to bash gay marriages are not seeing the context clearly.

Finally, we need to read this text in the context of the Jewish rules on divorce discussed in Deuteronomy 22 and 24 and elsewhere. Reading those passages reveals their chauvinistic perspective. Many of us would find them disgusting. Women are treated as pieces of property. Sex was seen as claiming property rights. This was the perspective of the Pharisees who were asking Jesus their question about divorce.

All of this is to say, before we just slap this text onto our modern day situation, we need to recognize things have changed. We look at women differently, thank God. We will need to glean the kernel of truth this scripture teaches and throw out the chaff that simply does not apply today.

What is that kernel of truth? Let’s look more carefully at what Jesus does. The Pharisees were coming from a very legalistic approach to scripture and life. They wanted to nail down all the possibilities that might make divorce acceptable. They wanted to be in control of the rules so they could say who was in and who was out. And, they believed only men counted in any discussion about ethics or theology.

Jesus turns the table on them. He says let’s talk about marriage and not divorce. Let’s talk about what God intended at creation in terms of a marriage between a man and a woman. Let’s not focus on the legalities surrounding divorce, on what we should do when human brokenness makes God’s intent hard to live up to.

Jesus then gives an impossible ideal. He says divorce is wrong. Privately he tells his disciples if someone remarries after a divorce, they commit adultery. Ouch! Are all divorces wrong? Are all who remarry after a divorce adulterers?

Remember this is the same Jesus who said if we look lustfully at someone else we have committed adultery in our hearts. By that standard, most of us in this room are adulterers! None of us live up to Jesus' impossible ideals. None of us fully live our lives as God intended when God created humanity.

So, what do we do? We have to figure out, situation by situation, what is best to do when mistakes have been made. We have to recognize we are human. Sometimes divorce, while sad and wrong in terms of what God intended, is much better than staying married.

The early church recognized this. One commentator said Mark would not have even been telling this story if his church were not practicing divorce. If we read Paul in his letters to the Romans and the Church in Corinth we will see him trying to help those churches deal with divorce. Right from the get go, the Church recognized they could not live up to Jesus' impossible ideal. They had to make tough decisions as to what is most healthy in any given situation.

The real issue underneath all this talk about divorce and marriage is God's kingdom. Jesus felt God's kingdom was breaking into their broken, ambiguous world. He was trying to help his disciples, and the people in that day, know how they might enter God's kingdom.

He said we most certainly do not enter that kingdom by our own merits. We don't enter by legalistically living up to the laws of scripture. We enter solely by God's grace. All are welcome in God's kingdom. Even those who didn't count in his day (women and children) were welcome in God's kingdom. Jesus went to great lengths to try and protect women by giving them more status and power in his version of marriage. Mark even mentions women divorcing their husbands, which was not allowed by Jewish law.

That is what ties the discussion about divorce with those few verses on children coming to Jesus. We are to enter the kingdom like children says Jesus. Jesus is most definitely not saying we are to be childish. He is saying, like children, we enter not because of any merit of our own, but by humbly receiving God's gift as children receive gifts.

Perhaps Fred Craddock put this best when he wrote, "If children **qualified** for the kingdom, then what happens to grace? And if we imitate children in order to **qualify**, what happens to us? Children are brought to receive Jesus' blessing, and so are we."

On this Worldwide Communion Sunday as we come forward to receive God's gift of the bread of life, let us put aside legalism when it comes to Christian ethics. While God's intent at creation is an important ideal, let us recognize we are very fallible human beings who rarely embody those ideals. And let us give thanks that when we fail, God's grace helps us in our brokenness. Amen

