

GOSPEL

Mark 10:2–16

Jesus announced and enacted in history the new reality of God's surprising activity. These two stories demonstrate this new reality: Women and children are accepted and valued, not dismissed as inferior to adult men.

²Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" ³He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" ⁴They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." ⁵But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But 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, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

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

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

So last Sunday, some of you may recall that in our Gospel text Jesus tells his disciples that if you are a stumbling block to any - you could have a millstone hung around your neck. Today, the appointed text talks about divorce and adultery. All of this on Stewardship Sunday when we are reminded about our giving to church. The perfect trifecta really – millstones, divorce and money. Sometimes I want to add an asterisk to our readings with a footnote that reads – by the way, just remember Pastor Randy doesn't pick the lessons we read each Sunday, these were picked for the 3-year cycle by a committee that represents Christian denominations way back in 1994... so blame them!

If we kept listening once we heard words in the Gospel text like divorce, flesh, and adultery, we eventually came to verse 13 which read: "Let the children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." That sounds nice, that sounds better...now that is a tempting part to preach about. It is tough not to jump off on speaking about this because we can all pretty much agree that we want children to see Jesus, and we love that image of the kids crawling over him. It is probably a frequent image that is painted and often hung near the education rooms of a church, that of kids coming to Jesus.

But let's go the harder route. It is important to note how the writer of Mark's Gospel relays these teachings of Jesus.

First of all, we have the setting. It's an axiom in real estate that "location is everything," and that holds true in the lesson. **Where** Jesus gave this commentary on divorce contains some insight. Jesus has left Galilee and is now in different turf. It's not surprising that the Pharisees in this region want to know what Jesus thinks about divorce, for this area was ruled by Herod Antipas. The background on Herod Antipas is that he

divorced his first wife to marry Herodias, the wife of his own brother. It was this marriage which John the Baptist criticized by telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." This critique cost John the Baptist his head! Since the Pharisees were at times allies with the Herods, we can almost picture them rubbing their hands, anticipating how Jesus might answer this dilemma. The crowds who gathered also would have known the hot button pressed by the authorities in posing this question. If Jesus speaks for divorce, he violates his own religion. If he speaks against divorce, John's fate could be Jesus' fate! So, in part, this question may have been to get Jesus into trouble with the Herod. Jesus had become a thorn in the side of the religious leaders, and if they could enlist the government's aid in getting rid of Jesus, all the better.

After this part about the marriage question, the text goes right into the story about the children coming to Jesus. Remember, last week Jesus held up a little one in the midst of the disciples and said that if anyone caused one to stumble it would be for them as if a millstone was hung around their neck. And now only a few verses later the twelve are doing the very thing he told them not to do. They are being the stumbling block. When we hear this text, it is easy to focus on the behavior of the disciples, but what can be overlooked is that for the crowds gathered around Jesus the scandal was not what the disciples did, but it was what Jesus said. Jesus again demonstrates the role and importance of children.

By these two events of Jesus being placed together in this text, there is a bigger issue being addressed that can be looked passed very easily. In both cases, we have Jesus lifting up the importance and relevance of both women and children, lifting and giving recognition of people in the society who had little or zero status. This would be the startling revelation

to the crowds that had gathered that day. There is no doubt the words on marriage were important and part of the set up, but here in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus uses these events to elevate children and women on the same level as a Jewish man.

With the message of people being equally validated, of equal worth, we can look at the words of Jesus on marriage and on children. Notice that the Pharisees are focused on the words of the law. However, as Jesus answers them he is focused on marriage and its intention. The religious authorities begin with the Law of Moses. The Pharisees based their understanding of divorce on Deuteronomy which states that if a man finds "something objectionable" in his wife he may divorce her. But, what constitutes "something objectionable?" Some say that only adultery could be objectionable while the others said that "something objectionable" could be anything that displeased the guy!

Notice Jesus' response to the authorities. Jesus changes the focus of the conversation from divorce to marriage as a sacred act directly instituted by God, he doesn't enter the Torah debate. Instead, he goes back to Genesis, to the beginning of humanity's existence. Jesus puts the focus on the bond of couples, locating it in God's intention. The key point is that the covenant of marriage is to be honored. Jesus does not lower God's standard, he points to it. Though as Christians, we do not desire divorce, in our present reality we know that some marriages should not continue. We know that in our humanity some brokenness is not able to be repaired due to our imperfections. To perpetuate a relationship that is beyond reconciliation would only be to compound misery. And many people in churches are divorced--and being divorced was the last thing they ever

wanted to happen. As we acknowledge the suffering that is in every divorce, we also acknowledge our hope in God for restoration.

A woman tells about the time when she was going through a divorce. She was standing in her church sanctuary with her 15-year-old daughter, when another woman approached her and said, “I hear you are divorcing. What I can’t understand is that if you love Jesus and he loves Jesus, why are you doing that?” This woman had not really talked to her before, and her rebuke in the presence of her daughter stunned her. She said that pain of it was that her husband and her both did love Jesus, but the marriage was beyond mending. She said: “If that same woman had just put her arms around me and said, ‘I’m sorry,’ it would have made all the difference in the world.”

Or how about considering the issue of children. The late Erma Bombeck wrote about what she once saw in church: “In church the other Sunday I was intent on a small child who was turning around and smiling at everyone. He wasn’t gurgling, spitting, humming, kicking, tearing the hymnals, or rummaging through his mother’s handbag. He was just smiling at people. Finally, his mother jerked him about and in a stage whisper that could be heard all around her, she said, ‘Stop that grinning! You’re in church!’ With that she gave him a belt and as the tears rolled down his cheeks, she added, ‘that’s better.’ Suddenly I was angry. It occurred to me the entire world is in tears, and if you’re not, then you better get with it. I wanted to grab this child with the tear-stained face close to me and tell him about my God. The happy God. The smiling God. The God who had to have a sense a humor to create the likes of us.”

These are just examples of how these things play out sometimes within church walls, let alone outside them. The call to follow Christ is not

simple, it is challenging. We are called to be a witness for the kingdom in our discipleship. This call does put some challenges before us. It puts God forth in the middle of our relationships, with one another, with our spouses, with our family and with our children. It puts God in the middle of our financial decisions, something that we discern this morning as we, intentionally, in the very middle of our worship, offer our own resources to God in this place. It puts God in the middle of all things in life.

But while God indeed is in the middle of these things, we strive not to forget what every disciple has in common - falling short, causing brokenness, and sometimes being broken. It is then that we recall God's great act of accepting every person for who they are, and loving us unconditionally, not so that we lessen our standards, but rather, to free us to live them out all the more. Amen.