

Proper 22 2006

Genesis 2:18-24

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Mark 10:2-16

The lection last week and this week carries the full weight of hot buttons for clergy and parishes, first we have texts that address money, and now it is marriage and divorce. If money and politics are taboo topics for sermons, the issues surrounding marriage and divorce are as politically charged today as they may have been in the days of Jesus. Looking beyond the letter of the law and the literal interpretation of the Markan narrative, the conflict may be more about who is living the proper, religiously accepted, normal, approved life and who is not. If the law is the dividing line between those persons who are in and those who are out, we all have a long way to go to be accepted if we are going to keep all the laws of Moses.

This type of challenge happens frequently and over a wide range of topics as the Pharisees test Jesus with questions: why do your disciples eat with unwashed hands, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife, or why do your disciples not keep the Sabbath? Who is in and who is out? In each case, Jesus sees the hypocrisy of the questions, the immaturity revealed in the questions, the lack of understanding of the abundance of God's love and grace. In every instance where a religious authority questions Jesus about the letter of the law, Jesus points to a deeper understanding, a revelation of what being in relationship with God truly means. In no case does Jesus exclude the one pointed out by the law-keeper-authority figure but points out the error of judgment.

To gain a clearer understanding of the text in Mark, we might ask three questions: what was the understanding of marriage in the culture of Jesus' day? What does the bible say about marriage and divorce? What is really at stake in the dialogue, then and now?

Marriage in ancient time as in some cultures today was an arrangement made between the family of the groom and the family of the bride. The individuals did not get

married, the families did. One family offered a male, the other a female. The wedding symbolized the fusion of the honor of both families and the political and economic implications of the union. Divorce then would mean dissolution of family ties, a challenge to the family of the wife and a breach of trust between the two families. Divorce was a sin against one's parents. The divorcing son was dishonoring his parents by undoing the marriage they had arranged.

Jewish custom in the rites of marriage involved a ceremony of betrothal, some time prior to the wedding, in which the father of the bride gave his consent to the union. The wedding was preceded by a procession of the bridegroom and friends to the bride's home. She was richly dressed, wearing a veil, which she would not remove until her entry into the bridal chamber. The ceremony included vows and a written contract (covenant) and a blessing over a cup of wine. During the ceremony the bride and groom stood under a canopy in the presence of at least ten witnesses. After the ceremony, the wedding company went in procession to the bridegroom's home while the witnesses sang love songs, danced, and took part in a feast that lasted from 7-14 days. This may well have been the custom of the wedding in Cana of Galilee that opened Jesus' ministry according to the Gospel of John.

The political agenda behind the Pharisee's question (test) in Mark may well refer to the charge John the Baptist made against Herod: "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife (Herodius)". The consequence of the challenge was the decapitation of John by Herod. Mark tells us in 3:6 that "the Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against Jesus, how to destroy him."

What does the Bible say about marriage and divorce? There is no one single answer. Moses says a man can divorce a wife (Dt 24:1). Paul says that divorce is permitted in some cases e.g. an unbelieving partner requests it (1 Cor 7:15). Paul also says that it is the sign of a good spouse not to divorce his or her unbelieving mate (1 Cor 7:12-13). Joseph (a righteous man) felt that it was his duty to divorce Mary (because he thought she had been unfaithful to him)” Matt 1:19. Jesus says you can’t separate what has become one (Mk 10:8-9).

There is hint in the New Testament about a Christian marriage rite. It is possible that the tradition and rite of Judaism was practiced. The early church fathers indicate that the rites were not radically different from those practiced by Jews or Roman pagans except that Christian prayers were offered and when the bishop conducted present the ceremony.

It was not until the late Middle Ages that marriage came under the purview of the church simply because it was often the case that the priest in the local city or village could read and write and records were kept in the parish church before the civil records were the responsibility of the courts. Banns were posted in public, the civil marriage was often held on the church porch, with communion given from the reserve sacrament.

The first Anglican Prayer Book of 1549 placed the marriage rite on Sunday morning between Morning Prayer and the Eucharist. In the first American prayer book of 1789, the rite was essentially a civil union, with Christian prayers. In 1892 the reference to marriage as signifying the union between Christ and his church was inserted along with reference to the marriage in Cana attended by Jesus. The 1928 version eliminated the vow of obedience by the woman, and offered Eucharistic proper suggesting that the wedding was done in the context of Eucharist. In the current version, marriage is set in the context of word and sacrament, but also offers a form for the blessing of a civil marriage. Scripture and tradition give us a plurality of views regarding marriage.

Today as in the day of the Pharisee’s testing of Jesus we find there is not a single answer in the Bible about this question because it is the wrong question. Jesus answered the right question: “what is God’s will concerning marriage?” God’s intentions

were revealed in creation, it is not good for one to be alone. Listen! In the creation story, everything that God made was declared to be GOOD. God saw that it was good! There is one exception: God looked at all that was made and said, it is not good that “man” meaning human being, should be alone. Think about it! Adam was not alone in the garden, God was with him, the dogs, cats, birds, and animals of every kind were there. God saw that it was not good, that creation was incomplete, because God knew that human beings could only grow into who we are created to be within and through relationships and in community.

We are relational creatures, made in the image of God who is triune. We need relationship, we need companionship, and we need to make a commitment to another person in order to grow into loving persons. A careful search of scriptures will reveal that the unity principle is what is common among the various citations. The “two shall become one flesh”, and “anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (1 Cor 6:16 & 17). The Greek word is *kollaomai*, and is used in Mark and Matthew in reference to the marriage relationships but also in relationship with faith. It appears in Acts and Luke to refer to commitment in a faith community and in relationship with God.

So we might naturally wonder why there are laws or scriptures devoted to the topic of divorce. The answer Jesus gave in Mark’s account is your hardness of heart. The image of hard-hearted occurs in several contexts, other than divorce, such as unwilling to learn a new interpretation of scriptures, a resentment and exclusion of those who are poor, a closed mind that clings to one way excluding all others. The truth is that most of us are unwilling to listen and learn from God when we have made up our minds about a given topic, or found a text from Scripture to support our prejudice. Jesus understood that the “laws” were only for the males who could put a woman away for displeasing him.

Consistent with the ministry and teaching of Jesus on other topics, we see here an example of inclusion, how the woman according to Greek/Roman law could also divorce her husband. Jesus continues with a teaching about adultery. In John 8:3-11 when Jesus is asked to judge a woman caught in adultery, he refused to condemn or punish her as the law of Moses dictated. It is not whether a person stays married or not that

saves the person, but faith in Jesus Christ that counts for salvation. Perhaps to reinforce the vulnerability of women, the text continues in vv 13-16 with children being brought to Jesus.

In stark contrast to the authority and powerful position of the Pharisees, the children are vulnerable, innocent, and open to learning from Jesus. The poor, the sick, the marginalized, the women, the children came to Jesus to receive a touch, word, gesture of acceptance. In every case, Jesus reacts with acceptance, compassion, and assurance. While the powerful, self-righteous Pharisees leave frustrated and vengeful, the vulnerable leave with a sense of affirmation. We might think carefully about who the vulnerable are today that need the reassurance of the love of God brought into human form in the person of Jesus.