

October 3, 2021
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 10:2-16

The Pharisees approached Jesus and asked, "Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?" They were testing him. He said to them in reply, "What did Moses command you?" They replied, "Moses permitted him to write a bill of divorce and dismiss her." But Jesus told them, "Because of the hardness of your hearts he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female. For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate."



In the house the disciples again questioned him about this. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

And people were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this he became indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it." Then he embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them.

Background

Last Sunday the gospel text ended with Jesus' exhortation to get rid of those areas that lead one to sin. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin..." (Mark 9:42). The gospel for this week almost directly follows last Sunday's text. In between are the following three verses: "Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if salt becomes insipid, with what will you restore its flavor? Keep salt in yourselves and you will have peace with one another. He set out from there and went into the district of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds gathered around him and, as was his custom, he again taught them." (Mark 9:49-10:1)

Mark's community would have recognized that Jesus was in the location that was governed by Herod, the one who had had John the Baptist imprisoned and beheaded for speaking out against Herod's marriage to his brother's wife. The community would also recognize that the Pharisees' question regarding divorce is not a simple request to hear Jesus' teaching on the matter, but an attempt to trap Jesus, and diminish his status and increase their own.

The question and Jesus' response focus on the disparity between what is permitted and the ideal that God intends. Jesus states that God's intent from the beginning of creation is that husband and wife should be one. What God brings together as one is incapable of being divided. What Moses permitted was quite different. In that period, people believed that God was acting through nature and also in and through their cultural practices. Just as children did not choose their parents, children did not choose their spouse. They understood that through parents God was responsible for bringing children into the world, and again through parents God was acting to bring two families together through the marriage of their children. Marriage was much more the joining of two families than the joining of two individuals.

In verses 10-12 Jesus continues his reflection with his disciples, away from the crowd and the Pharisees. Here he raises the possibility for a woman to divorce her husband, at least in theory: ("If she divorces her husband...") This would have been quite shocking for his disciples, because the Jewish culture would not have considered this to be a possibility. A woman's value was in her relationship to her father, her brother, and her husband or his brothers. She had value because of their reproductive potential. The scriptures are filled with stories that remind us of the hardship position of women who reached old age without having a child, preferable a male. If a husband divorced his wife, shame was cast on the men of her family. The male relatives were expected to make the situation right, even if that meant bloodshed. If a couple was found to be in an adulterous relationship, the husband of the woman was shamed. A woman did not have enough status in this culture to be shamed. This male-dominated way of thinking could not conceive of adultery by a husband as a sin against his wife. Jesus' teaching in verse 11 would be a totally new perspective for the Jewish community.

However, Roman law at the time did allow for a woman to divorce her husband. That this Roman perspective was incorporated into Jesus' teaching on divorce raises some questions. Scholars seem to be uncertain whether this adaptation originated with Jesus or was an adaptation by Mark, reflecting on Jesus' teaching. This teaching would have been difficult to accept for those who struggled to maintain the purity of their traditions. They would see any Roman influence as representative of their oppressors standing between them and their rightful position as God's chosen people.

The text offers no insight as to why the disciples prevented the children from coming to Jesus. Instead, the text says only that Jesus was upset with the disciples' behavior. Nor does Mark tell us how it is that one should be like a child. It would be helpful to remember that in that time, children, like women, had no rights or esteem in themselves. Without an explanation or the context for Jesus' behavior, the apparent intent is to show who Jesus saw value in. Jesus is treating those who had no status, in society or in the religious tradition of the day, as having value and importance in the eyes of God.

Reflection Questions

1. What was the last wedding in your family? What is it that brought the couple together? How much alike or different are the two families? What kind of impact on the two families do you think their marriage will have as it unfolds?
2. How has God worked to bring people into your life at different points of your life?
3. Can you envision the Pharisees approaching Jesus and asking, "Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?" What kind of day is it? Is it early morning, or toward evening? What are the surroundings? Is a crowd present? Are women present?
4. Jesus seems to have deliberately traveled into the area where his cousin John was killed by Herod and is confronted by the same issue. Are there areas, either geographical or emotional, that you avoid because of past experiences? Does Jesus' action in the gospel text speak to you?
5. What do you hear within yourself as Jesus in the gospel distinguishes between what Moses permitted and what God intended?
6. What are you feeling within yourself when Jesus tells the disciples to let the children come to him?

7. In today's gospel, Jesus seems to be deliberately challenging what people of the day had become accustomed to--making distinctions between men and women and adults and children. Can you take some time to talk with God about a place where God may be challenging you, or where you are feeling called to challenge another, or some other thought that arose within you as you reflected on this gospel?

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