



Sunday, October 6, 2024

Mark 10:2-16

“Created As Equals”

Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

I must admit I was briefly tempted to ignore the first part of our Gospel text today. Options include selecting an entirely different set of readings for today, as one of my fellow pastors is doing. Or, omitting the first part of this lesson so that all people hear is how Jesus wants the little children to come to him. Who cannot come up with an easy sermon on that? We should all be like children coming to Jesus with open and trusting hearts. Or maybe we ARE all little children, as I often think of myself. I’m happiest when I’m around toddlers.

Or, like another pastor I heard about, giving people the entire text and then telling them “Divorce is difficult, so we’re not going to go there.” No. Once we have been confronted by this reading, we must pursue it, mainly because many continue to use these words of Jesus to justify the church’s harsh judgments against its own people. Catholics can go through civil divorce proceedings, but, in the eyes of the church, are allowed to remarry only after receiving an annulment, which is a judgment that the marriage was not valid to begin with.

Take a look at the first hit I got when I Googled “Catholic teaching on divorce.” On the web site www.catholic.com – sounds official, right? – someone compiled “Eight things you have to know about the church’s teaching on divorce.” Here are the first two:

“1. Divorce, dissolution of a marriage, is not possible between two baptized persons.

Guess who said that? Not just a vicar of Christ, but Jesus Christ himself! Jesus forbids divorce, decreeing that husband and wife are ‘no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder.’

“2. Divorce and remarriage makes for adultery.

Since marital life ordinarily includes the marital act, remarriage after divorce creates the conditions for adultery. On this, Jesus did not mince words: ‘Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.’”

When Jesus’ own words are used as weapons against God’s people, it’s time to take a closer look.

Mark hands us the most important tool we need right off the bat: That *this was a test*. “Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus, they asked....” Jesus did not volunteer these words randomly. He chose them carefully for a specific purpose.

Remember that the Jewish temple leaders were always trying trap Jesus into saying something that could get him arrested. In this case they are hoping to get him to make a statement that they can use to show that Jesus is against families, because they remember what he said several chapters back. In Mark 3 we heard, “A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.”³³ And he replied, “Who are my

mother and my brothers?" ³⁴And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

How dare he question who his mother and brothers are? It sounds like he's against families!

Here in Mark 10, just as Jesus does every other time the Pharisees try to trap him, he turns the tables on them. Instead of a statement on the legality of divorce, Jesus goads the Pharisees into a confrontation that exposes them as having misunderstood their own sacred texts.

First, he asks them to recall Moses' teaching, which they know from Deuteronomy 24:1:

¹Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house...."

Jesus explains that Moses gave them this teaching not to legitimize divorce, but as response to their hardness of heart. At that time, a man could divorce his wife on the grounds of the pettiest complaint. She isn't a good cook. She snores. Such pettiness betrays hardened hearts. The law thus caters to the hard heart of the husband in permitting him to dissolve the marriage over nothing more than a whim.

Such control exercised by the husband over the marriage is not what God intended, Jesus continues. Just look at Genesis: God created male and female. When a man leaves his parents and is joined to his wife, they become one. This doesn't have anything to do with whether or not the marriage might not someday be dissolved -- but that, in the marriage, they are joined as equals. They have, together, become one flesh.

It is precisely because Jesus sees marriage as a union of equals that he engages the Pharisees in the way that he does.

What Jesus goes on to say to the disciples underscores his point that the woman is equal to the man. Again, his purpose is not to pontificate on the morality or legality of divorce.

Listen again to verse 12: If a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery. The fact was that it was virtually impossible in Jewish culture of the time for a woman to initiate divorce proceedings. Technically a wife could force a husband to divorce her if she could prove to a rabbinic court that he had broken the marriage contract, but it seldom happened. And why? Because women's voices were considered so inconsequential that they were not allowed to testify in court. Jesus, on the other hand, says that women can divorce their husbands just as husbands can divorce their wives. A level playing field.

His elevation of women in this way is profound. It means that a woman is not to be treated as an object to be casually dismissed. Rather, the wife holds full partnership in the marriage. And if either husband or wife initiate divorce and then remarry, they commit the same sin of adultery against the former spouse -- meaning, both are fully accountable for their actions. In other words, they are equals. "God made them male and female."

As we've seen, it takes a little work to arrive at this place. Those who are more careless with scripture often tend to use Jesus' words to support their own agendas, without any effort to consider more deeply what he was saying. The effect in this case of these verses is to foster guilt and shame in God's own people. We cannot abide Jesus' own words being used in this way. Attention to context and meaning MUST be paid.

Now for our own context. I'm guessing that the reality of divorce has touched all our lives in one way or another. Perhaps you've been through it yourself. Perhaps your current spouse has. Perhaps at one point you considered and then rejected it. Perhaps you have extended family members whose lives have been changed by divorce, the effects rippling across generations.

For many who find themselves locked in life-extinguishing patterns of abuse, the dissolution of the marriage is the only path from death back into life. In this, there are three things to remember:

First, God desires abundant life for all his creatures. What makes God happiest is when we experience the fullness of all that life has to offer, and then freely offer back to God our praise and thanksgiving for all the blessings we enjoy. Love given, received, and returned in greater measure.

Second, human beings were created to be in community. We heard in Genesis, "It is not good that the man should be alone." And thus the partner was created, the partner who from that point on shared equally in all that transpired – from the goodness of Eden to expulsion from the garden. When two become one flesh and that union is later disrupted, God weeps. Hurt and brokenness become part of the new reality for all parties. But listen to Jesus' words today in verse 9: "What God has joined together, let no one separate." He does not say "When two people have come together in marriage, let nothing break that apart." Instead, Jesus lifts up the sanctity of the human bond in loving community – wherever and however two people are able to find that.

Third, if and when the fabric of a family is torn apart, in the midst of that brokenness we find Jesus present more vividly than we had known him before, assuring us with his own wounds that death always yields to new life. The pain we feel is part of what it means to be human. Jesus knows the depth of our pain and is always present in it, guiding us through the valley of the shadow of death into the goodness of God's mercy that always awaits us.

The kingdom of God is not only a vision for the future, one in which all human beings share equally. It also shapes how we live today. The new life Jesus proclaims means we are need no longer live as if we're on the defense. Jesus has already won the greatest victory in the universe. The vision at the end of Revelation is not just for the end of time, but also for us, right now: "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." Life wins.

Speaking of winning, my team is out of the playoffs. Good luck with the Mets this afternoon, Phillies fans. Yet, even in our Milwaukee sorrow I can still picture a cosmic locker room flowing with champagne. We as the people of God individually, and the body of Christ together, are called through all the means at our disposal to bring the world into that great celebration.

Amen.