

## Words for the Table

I'd like to offer a few reminders before we engage this morning's text from Mark's gospel.

The systems of this world have codified a set of laws, policies, and other mechanisms that seek to perpetuate a hollow falsehood: we are, especially, the most powerful and privileged among us, *independent* from our neighbors.

Jesus, on the other hand, tells us time and again, that our very existence is rooted in our *interdependence* with one another.

Before we read one word of today's text, I would encourage each of us to remember that Mark's gospel does NOT, I repeat, DOES NOT serve as a litmus test or magic 8-ball for confirming or denying the legitimacy of contemporary legislation and social standards. Mark's gospel is NOT, has NEVER been, and will NEVER be a license for legitimizing marginalization, no matter how many Charlatans want to tell you otherwise.

Yes, Mark's gospel often meets us in lonely, abandoned places. Yes, Mark's gospel often expresses the anxiety, and urgency, and gruffness that accompany chaotic and uncertain times. Yes, sometimes, the fierce staccato of Mark's gospel can provoke us to discomfort. But Mark's author is always, always, ALWAYS concerned with promoting relationships of mutual dependence, those that reflect God's creative intent for the world and God's deepest love for humanity.

So...friends, hear now, good words, not from the mouths of your local manipulators, but from the heart of one who writes with the hope of realizing God's inbreaking realm.

**Mark 10:2-16 (page 46 in your pew Bibles).**

*Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 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, let no one separate."*

*Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 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."*

*People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But 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. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:2-16, NRSV).*

So...yeah, on this World Communion Sunday, a kind of Thanksgiving Dinner for the Church, divorce is definitely the topic we might expect to discuss at our meal, right? I certainly thought it taboo as I began preparation for today's homily, but crazy as it may sound, I believe this is a text that can strengthen our table. Let me see if I can convince you.

Let's begin by noting that Pharisees and other authorities, at least the ones that show up in Mark's gospel, are never really interested in the spirit of the law, or how specific laws will affect the welfare of their community. In many instances, their mastery of the law, is just another tool to show their power, and an opportunity to dismiss the authority of Jesus. The Pharisees want to trip Jesus up on a technicality and squash his credibility.

Today's gotcha question is about the legality of a husband obtaining a certificate of dismissal from his spouse. Remember, that in ancient Jewish law, marriage was not an equitable relationship. Not only was a woman utterly dependent upon the provisions of her husband, but in legal matters, she was dehumanized and reduced to property. And in this ridiculous and inequitable code of law, a husband could dismiss his wife for any reason, but she, on the other hand, had no means to do the same. In such an arrangement, a wife is both dependent and defenseless.

This terminology of dismissal is perhaps most famous in Matthew's gospel, when Joseph considers whether to "quietly dismiss" Mary after learning of her pregnancy. I still struggle each December in Advent to equate quiet dismissal with compassion, empathy, and justice, or as some mark of honor for Joseph. But I'll save that criticism for another time.

Throughout his ministry and teachings, Jesus acknowledges that human laws exist to serve the needs of powerful men who insist on their independence. But Jesus is also quick to point out that such hard-hearted laws exist in stark contrast to God's intention. Jesus reminds the Pharisees of the original garden relationship, where two earth creatures were helpmates, partners who existed in mutual dependence with one another. They were collaborators.

Marriage, for the Pharisees, is anything but a divine relationship. For the Pharisees, marriages are mechanisms to accomplish an end: to consolidate power, to ensure the passing of lands, to move the levers of the system. And divorce is another mechanism, a tool that helps them keep greasing the wheels of power.

Jesus points them back to what it means to be married: to be in a collaborative, partnering, co-dependent, safe-to-be-vulnerable relationship, where persons express love and care for one another, and that love and care offers a glimpse of the love and care we know in God.

A side commentary. Read your scriptures, really, really read them. When God, or God through biblical writers condemns or criticizes human behaviors, it's never, ever about the categorization of the relationship they are in. It's always about the lack of equity, dignity, humanity, and mutual respect that occur in very specific instances. Humanity may be in the business of categorization. But God is in the business of affection, protection, collaboration, respect, and interdependence.

Back to our text. I'm mixing gospels, so please forgive me, but remember in Matthew 22 when Jesus instructs his listeners to render

unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's? The community leaders wanted to trap Jesus; they wanted him to either publicly support or reject an imperial tax, thereby alienating him from the peasant class angry with Roman occupation, or the local Roman authorities who would bristle at any challenge to their claim. Jesus points out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees by noting that they use Roman coins themselves to operate within the local economy. I think the same kind of discussion is happening here.

The Pharisees want to ask about the legalities of severing relationships. Jesus redirects them, and seems to ask, "Shouldn't you define what a relationship is before you begin the business of dismissing it?"

But Jesus goes even further. And I know, this is the place that gives us the most trouble. Husband AND wife, (note the and), commit adultery by divorcing AND, (again, note the and), remarrying another person. Jesus is not setting up an opportunity to tell us about the heated places adulterers will go. There's no mention of punishment. And it's not like this passage is annotated. We know Mark's author didn't hold back last week on the discomfort coming to wandering eyes, hands, and feet! We got a whole paragraph about Hell or Gehenna. But not today. Make sure you remember that.

Jesus is, as the kids are fond of saying, trolling the Pharisees, and he's doing a masterful job! The Pharisees aren't concerned about dismissing equitable, garden relationships, because again, they don't comprehend relationships rooted in God's intentions. Jesus demonstrates the mutual dependence of marriage, by noting that through infidelity, both husband AND wife are capable of wounding, offending, or aggrieving the other. Again, Jesus is not interested in meting out judgment to the

unrighteous; Jesus is interested in demonstrating the absurdity of societal rules that marginalize neighbors.

We do, however, live in a world where people like to cherry-pick texts. Jesus is demonstrating equity, but stubborn folks are only going to hear a definition of adultery. And so of course, Jesus must also be pro-marriage, and pro-life, and pro-business, and pro-documentation, and pro-whatever-else politicians think need to be identified in absolutes.

Well, here's what I believe Jesus is. Jesus is pro-relationship. Jesus desires for people to be in the kind of relationships where there is equity, and value, and deep desire to treat partners in the ways they'd wish to be treated. Jesus asks us to do those things, daily, that maintain equity, empathy, and love, in order that we become less programmed to wound one another. Jesus has high expectations. I would go so far as to say Jesus desires for all of us to model God's love in our relationships with others, be it our partners and spouses, our children, our parents, our siblings, our neighbors, or even our enemies.

But Jesus' desire for us to fulfill these kinds of relationships does not mean that Jesus discards, damns, or excludes people who wound their relationship partners. Jesus bids us to let go of the transactional, absolute, rigid, legal, insistent nature of contractual arrangements, and exchange them for the transformative, loving, fluid nature of God-centered relationships.

It's funny though. Even in the presence of Jesus, we tend to insist on a transactional world. And sitting at the feet of Jesus, we keep asking, "Tell us about love. Tell us about forgiveness. Tell us about community. How do we cultivate such things?" The little children come, too, but we shush them, and shoo them away. The stuff of God, the stuff of life, the

stuff of love – it can only be received in neat, orderly, privileged fashion. And certainly not in the presence of sippy cups and giggles.

But Jesus rebukes us. And he says, “You see these precious kiddos. If you ask them about love, or how to be a friend, or how to forgive someone, or how to give thanks for the good things in their lives, do you reckon they would provide a dozen commentaries, or thrust the law in front of us? Or do you think they would simply offer us a hug, or share some of their Gushers, or invite us to sing a round of Wheels on the Bus or Jesus Loves Me? We dismiss them, and yet God’s kingdom or God’s kin-dom is revealed in them. Where we see competitors, our children see buddies.”

Good friends, Jesus calls us to value the kind of equitable relationships that have been fused in our DNA since creation. And Jesus beckons us to receive God’s kingdom as children not yet hamstrung by a desire to be more and have more than our neighbors. As we come to Christ’s table, may we value the createdness of one another, and may we imagine with childlike wonder and openness, the beautiful possibilities of God’s world.

Amen.