

Handle with care: Mark 10.1-16

The "wedding church" at Cana in Galilee, the site of Jesus' first miracle (John 2.1-12), and a place where pilgrims often go to renew their marriage vows. Many thanks to Linda for today's thought-provoking reflection.



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.'

Let's begin by being honest, we approach this passage as if 'walking on eggshells.' It's full of pitfalls and there's no way around its challenges, its heartache, and its ramifications for and ripple effects on all of the relationships involved. Still divorce has touched too many lives to leave a passage like this just hanging in the air.

So “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Divorce is a question that will no doubt affect all of us at some point or other. Some of us, myself included, have dealt with it in our own lives and marriages. Some of us have known the pain of our parents or children’s divorce. All of us, I suspect, know someone who is divorced or has been affected by divorce. It is a reality of our lives and our world. Sometimes divorce is necessary. Other times it comes too quickly and too easily, an escape from the hard work of being in relationship. Always, it is a spiritual as well as an emotional tragedy with profound and lasting consequences for all those involved.

The Pharisees’ question, however, is not a pastoral question. It is a legal question, a test. Marriage in first century Palestine was an arrangement between families, not a choice between individuals. It was more about an exchange of property, ‘the woman’ than it was about romance. In asking their question the Pharisees are not concerned about a young couple who through illusion, immaturity, or naiveté made a mistake in choosing to marry. They are not concerned about a marriage that has not only become devoid of love but destructive of life. They are not concerned about the emotional wellbeing of the couple. Their concern is Jesus. They have been plotting “how they might catch him out and destroy him.”

The Pharisees already know the answer to the question they are asking. “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce a wife”. So, will Jesus follow or reject the Law of Moses? That is the context for this passage. That is the context for Jesus’ words and they are not easy words. Jesus neither accepts nor rejects the Law of Moses. But rather he re-interprets and deepens it. Marriage and divorce are not about transactions but about relationships, people, and God. He recognizes the Law of Moses for what it is, a concession to their hardness of heart.

Divorce happens. You know that. I know that. The Pharisees knew that. And Jesus knew that. Despite this, God’s intention is that a husband and wife would become one flesh, that no one would separate what God has joined together. Scripture and the Church view the marriage of husband and wife as representing the oneness of God and

the union between God and humanity. Today's wedding services begin with 'The Christian understanding of Marriage', part of which states:

Marriage is a gift of God in creation through which husband and wife may know the grace of God. It is given that, as man and woman grow together in love and trust, they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind, as Christ is united with his bride, the Church.

No one should enter into it lightly or selfishly, but reverently and responsibly in the sight of Almighty God.

That is why divorce is so spiritually painful and why Jesus seems so narrow and absolute in what he says. The Pharisees want to talk about procedure. Jesus makes the conversation about substance. For the Pharisees the issue is the state of the law. For Jesus the issue is the state of one's heart. In that regard divorce is not limited to married persons. Divorce is an issue for everyone regardless of one's marital status. Divorce happens in all those relationships in which we or another have become hard hearted and estranged. It divides husbands and wives, parent and child, brother and sister, black and white, rich and poor, right-wing and liberal-left. Hard heartedness is not simply about having differences. It's about having no need of the other.

We can all give reasons for divorce. We can describe the fights, pain, fear, abuse, incompatibility, and differences of opinions, values, and dreams. We can name the failures and disappointments. We can recall what she said or what he did. They are real but they only justify the legality of divorce. The reasons leave us stuck.

The challenge of today's text is neither marriage nor divorce. It is the work of examining our own heart and to name those places of hardness, to be willing to change and be changed. Jesus is calling us back to the created order; he isn't holding up to us an ideal vision of the perfect relationship, but to remind us that to be human is to be in

relationship, regardless and whatever that relationship might look like to the outside world.

Every blessing Linda