

Oct. 3 2021, Pent 19B

Mark 10:2-16

Following Jesus to Higher Standard

Hard words from Jesus today. They would be easy to skip over and pretend we didn't hear, but as one of our journal verses said this week, *"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth"* (2 Tim. 2:15). But's let's dig in and do our best and see what blessing Jesus has for us in the words about marriage and divorce.

But's let begin with a few observations. First marriage is good. It is God's idea. It goes all the way back to creation. God saw all that He created and called it good. The first "not good" in the Bible was when God saw Adam was alone and said, "It is not good for man to be alone." So He created Eve and gave Adam the blessing of marriage and companionship.

Second, divorce hurts. It hurts the couple involved. It hurts children. It hurts the parents and extended family of the couple getting divorced. And when the couple attend a church, divorce hurts the church.

Third, while marriage is a gift, for some people singleness is also a gift. I don't want to give the impression that single people or widowed people or divorced people are somehow incomplete. They are not. They are created in God's image, redeemed by Christ and blessed by God in their singleness.

And one more observation that is critical to us understanding these words of Jesus: Jesus was answering a question from a group of people whose only concern was testing Him. He was not answering a sincere question from a person dealing with the hurt of divorce. If He were, His answer would have been radically different. We know from other interactions of Jesus—the woman at the well who had been married 5 times and the woman caught in adultery—Jesus deals with that hurt with grace and compassion. There is no condemnation in Jesus words for people dealing with the pain of their sin and bad choices. He covers them with grace. He embraces them with compassion.

So when we bring up this painful topic, we do so while covering it with grace and compassion. The church needs to be a place that strengthens marriages and helps people heal from divorce. We can't do that without a lot of grace and compassion. Now into the words of Jesus.

I would like to give you some historical background to this Mark passage. In the Old Testament, divorce and remarriage were both permissible. The Biblical reference is Deuteronomy 24:1, where divorce and remarriage are permissible within Jewish law. It said divorce was permissible in the case of "indecency" on the part of the bride. (There was no allowance for the woman to get the divorce if the man was "indecent").

The historical background for marriage is also interesting during the times of Christ. Divorces had become commonplace, and the commonness of divorce was influenced by the debates of the current rabbis, the master teachers, of Jesus' day. The debates about divorce were a hot topic between the followers of the rabbi Shammi and the followers of the rabbi, Hillel. Shammi said that divorce was allowable only for sexual immorality. Hillel was more "progressive" or modern and he said "indecency" in Deuteronomy 24 could cover anything from adultery to simply getting tired of your wife. And so divorce was a hot topic in Jewish society at the time of Christ, and had increased rapidly.

It is with this background that we approach the story from Mark today. The Pharisees were again trying to trap Jesus with a trick question, so he would come out the loser, and so they asked him about the hot topic of the day: "Do you believe in divorce, Jesus?" And Jesus replied, "What does Moses teach you in the Jewish law?" They said: "Divorce is permissible." And Jesus replied: "That is because of your hardness of hearts. Moses in the Jewish law allowed for divorce, but I go back to the book of Genesis, which was given to us before the Jewish law, and in the book of Genesis it says: A man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, and the two shall become one. What God has joined together, let no one separate!" "What?" the Pharisees no doubt shouted at Him. Both sides. Both the Shammi and Hillel Pharisees: "No divorce? No remarriage?" they thought inside their brains. The disciples of Jesus couldn't believe it either and so they got Jesus into a little house and asked him, "Did you really mean what you said? No Moses? No divorce? No remarriage?" And Jesus replied to his disciples: "Whoever divorces and remarries commits adultery. This is true for men and women." I like the comment from the Gospel of Matthew's account of the story where the disciples then say, "Jesus, if we would have known this, if we would have known we couldn't divorce and remarry, we would have remained single."

... So Jesus upset the apple cart: No divorce. No remarriage. Now, that is tough on every one!!!

So what do we do with these crisp words of Jesus here in the twentieth century? What do we do with these words of Jesus which permit no divorce and remarriage in a culture and church in which many couples have been happily remarried for a long, long time? How do we learn from this story about divorce?

I would like to make two points. The first is this: Jesus was prophetic in His condemnation of the commonness of divorce in His day. Jesus was challenging the marriage values and practices of His day. Jesus challenged the values of His day said that marriage was not sacred. Jesus challenged the values of His day which said that divorce should be cheap and easy. Jesus challenged the values of his day that shattered the Jewish home and left many women in absolute poverty. Jesus is the first human being to lift up marriage so high, to lift the status of women up so high, to radically revolutionize both marriage and the status of women, in a society where women and divorce and marriage were so low. I love Jesus' quotation from the book of Genesis: "what God has joined together, let no one destroy." Marriage is God's gift and God's act. We treat it as such. And where we can't, we cover it with grace and forgive the sins, mistakes and bad choices.

A second comment I want to make is that Jesus upheld marriages. He lifted up and exalted the state of marriage, and ever since Jesus, the church has been working hard at helping good marriages to become great marriages and has been helping problem marriages to work through their difficulties. Let me explain. The church, following the words of Genesis and Jesus, has always been captivated by the concept that the two people can become one person. The Apostle Paul even calls the man and woman becoming one a sacrament, a grand mystery. According to the statistics that we teach our confirmation students, the divorce rate of a normal, red blooded American couple is about 50% but the divorce rate between a man and woman who together kneel at the altar on a regular basis and whose faith is deeply genuine as evidenced in their prayer life and time commitment, their divorce rate is 2%. And we ask why: why are marriages much more solid and loving when both the husband and wife are a significant participant in our worship lives? I have a theory. The same kinds of people who make time for God are the same kind of people

who make time for their spouse. The same kinds of people who share their feelings with God are the same kind of people who share their feelings with each other. The same kinds of people who give little sacrifices to God, (what is an hour or two of worship on Sunday morning?) are the same kind of people who make little sacrifices for each other, and that is what marriage is: a million little sacrifices for each other, and none of them are covered by the rule book of marriage. I know, I have been married now for 31 years and I know first-hand about inner communication and a million little sacrifices for each other in love.

I also find that people who are having troubles in their marriages actually go to work on them through the church. Christian church counselors are loaded with people who are working with their marriage problems. The church of Jesus Christ, following the radical teachings of Jesus Christ, has always been a community that works to make good marriages great and sick marriages healthy. But if we shame people for their marriage problems, this will never happen. And the church needs to be a place where people heal from the hurt of divorce. But if we shame them for divorce, that healing will never happen in the church. We are a people of love, grace and compassion.

So what Jesus is doing in these passages is the same thing He is always doing for His church—holding them to something higher and better than they could ever do for themselves. He is empowering them to live up to the high calling He has placed upon them. Let's be that church that makes good marriages great, makes troubled marriages strong, applies the forgiveness that Jesus won at the cross to bring healing to the hurt caused by divorce.