

One Sort of Justification
A Sermon on Mark 10:1-16 by the Rev. Philip Major
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It turns out, a lot of us have a lot of experience with divorce. If I asked people to raise their hands if they have been through a divorce, many of us would have our hands up. If I asked people to raise their hands if their parents or their children have been divorced, even more of us would have our hands in the air. And if I asked people to raise their hands if they have any brothers or sisters or aunts or uncles who have been divorced, even more of us would have our hands in the air. And at the end of my questions, a lot of us would be very tired from holding our hands up in the air. We have a lot of experience with divorce.

Jesus has some important ideas about marriage and divorce, but his concerns are different than what we might understand from a simple reading of the words. We tend to make mistakes when we read passages about marriages in the Bible and assume that the words apply directly to us. Understandings of marriage have changed a lot in the past three hundred years. Just imagine how much peoples' ideas about the purposes of marriage have changed in the past three thousand years.

Two or three thousand years ago, the main purpose of marriage was survival, specifically the survival and prosperity of the family. Marriages strengthened connections between closely related groups of people. Marriage between cousins was very common. Marriages between cousins strengthened the bonds among members of a tribal group.

The marriage of Jacob to Leah in the book of Genesis is a good example. Jacob worked for his uncle, Laban, for seven years. As a reward for his seven years of labor, Jacob was permitted to marry Laban's daughter. Jacob thought he would be able to marry Laban's younger daughter, his cousin Rachel. But Laban tricked him, and forced him to Rachel's older sister, Leah. Jacob loved Rachel so much that he labored for another seven years, in order to be permitted to marry her. Notice that in this traditional form of marriage, the man was permitted to be married to several women at the same time, but of course, a woman was not permitted to be married to several men at the same time. When someone uses the phrase 'traditional marriage' I think of the story of Jacob and Leah and Rachel.

The inequalities of marriage in ancient times carried over to rules about divorce. A man was permitted to divorce his wife, but a wife was not able to divorce her husband. It was not complicated for a man to divorce his wife. All he had to do was to say, or write on a piece of parchment, "I divorce you. We are no longer married." There were no elaborate procedure and no arguments in front of a judge. Since many men had multiple wives, and it was easy for a man to divorce one of his wives, many Jewish women lived in great fear of offending their husbands. Being a divorced woman was a life-threatening condition.

Moving forward several hundred years, in Jesus' time marriages between cousins and other relatives were still very common. Marriages were still used for the practical purpose of strengthening alliances within and between family groups, but some of the rules about marriage and divorce were changing. In the Roman empire polygamy was not legally permitted. Since men could no longer have two or three or four wives, some men began to divorce their wife in order to marry a second wife.

One of the most famous examples of this is described in Mark 6. King Herod Antipas divorced his first wife in order to marry a woman named Herodias, who had been previously married to his half-brother. In an unusual move, Herodias divorced her first husband in order to marry Herod Antipas. As you may remember, John the Baptist publicly denounced Herod and Herodias for divorcing their spouses in order to marry each other. Herodias wasn't happy about this, so when the opportunity presented itself, she found a way to make sure John the Baptist wouldn't be criticizing her anymore.

All of this is the setting for the arguments between Jesus and the Pharisees in today's Gospel passage. The passage begins at chapter ten, verse one: *Jesus left Capernaum and went to the region of*

Judea, and went across the Jordan River. Again crowds of people gathered around him, and, as was his custom, he taught them. Then some Pharisees came as Jesus was gathered with the crowd, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

The setting is important. During Jesus' lifetime the land of Israel had been divided into four quadrants, which were ruled by four kings. The land beyond the Jordan River was the territory of Herod Antipas, the king who had executed John the Baptist. So the Pharisees were almost certainly not really interested in Jesus' answer to the question about whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. The Pharisees were trying to entrap Jesus with this question about divorce. If they could get Jesus to criticize King Herod in his home territory, then King Herod might arrest Jesus and have him executed.

This was real life for Jesus, and it might seem like real life to some of us. There are real life situations where people appear to be 'just asking questions', but their real purpose is to lay a trap for someone else. So the first idea I take from this passage is not about divorce but about our motivations when we are having conversations. When we are having conversations we need to examine our own motivations, and we are aware that other people sometimes have bad motivations. Is there an intention to hurt or entrap the other person? Jesus' disciples don't have energy to waste on this kind of foolishness.

So Jesus responds to the pharisees question with a question of his own. *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."*

Jesus observes something you might have noticed; there are passages in scripture that are in conflict with one another. Some Jewish groups, such as the Essenes, responded to these conflicts in scripture in a way that reminds me of some Christian groups today. They responded to conflicts in scripture by creating strict, elaborate codes of conduct. Jesus does not. Jesus asks his disciples to examine their intentions and to think about God's intentions about marriage.

The important thing is for us to examine our intentions in our close relationships with other people, including in our marriages. Some people seem to enter into marriages very casually, with no intention of ever giving up anything for the sake of their marriage.

Jesus is pushing his disciples away from a traditional, legalistic, practical approach toward marriage, and toward a new, different approach toward marriage. Jesus is not defending traditional marriage in his time, because in his time marriage was kind of like a business transaction and it was very unequal. So the second idea I take from this passage is that Jesus is advocating for a new approach toward marriage that is based on love. These ideas of love and equality were more fully explained by St. Paul as Paul preached a Gospel message about our relationships. Like Jesus, when Paul talks about us loving one another he asks us to pay attention to our intentions and to imitating the example of Christ.

The third idea I take from this passage is about power. Jesus was concerned about people abusing their power in ways that hurt others. Jesus was specifically critiquing the selfish, abusive behavior of many men in his time. Jesus was criticizing the increasing practice in his generation of Jewish and Roman men divorcing their first wife in order to marry a second wife. The issue of divorce was still mostly a matter for men, because, even though under Roman law women were permitted to divorce their husbands, very few women had the kind of wealth and power that Herodias possessed. The few women who were exercising the right to divorce during Jesus' time were almost certainly not poor women who were suffering abuse at the hands of their husbands.

This leads us to ask what is happening a few verses later, where Jesus says, *“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”* This is different from the versions of this passage found in Matthew and Luke. In Matthew and Luke, the part about a woman divorcing her husband is not included. It seems likely that the earliest written copies of Mark's Gospel also did not include these words, but that they were added on later by someone who thought Jesus' words needed some serious editing.

I once lived in a small town in New Hampshire. There was an old farmhouse high up on a hillside where an old man lived. He was one person I never saw anywhere in the town, at the grocery store or the 4th of July parade. No one seemed to know much about him. He was mysterious. The man still had a herd of cows, but the farmhouse was falling apart. The paint was peeling, and no one had mowed the grass around the house for years. I asked one of my friends about the man and she told me the story.

Many decades before the old farmer had a wife and two little children. Occasionally, the woman would bring her two young children into town to go to church or to go to the store, but there were weeks when they were not seen at church or anywhere else. The woman and her children seemed to bear faded scars on their faces, neck and arms. One night, in the middle of the night the woman packed her children into the family car with a few bags of belongings and drove away. No one had seen or heard from them since that night, thirty or forty years before.

We don't know the details, but I'm pretty sure you can fill in the details because the story is all too common. And when the woman went to talk to an attorney in order to get a legal divorce from her abusive husband, God's only intention for her was love and mercy.

The same is true for you. God's only intention for you is for more love and mercy in your life. For many of us, there has come a most difficult time in our lives when we realized that the only way for us to love was to end a marriage. If you are acting with love and mercy for others and for yourself, rest in the knowledge that you are following God's way.

Our stories are often complicated, but God's story is not. It makes no difference whether we are single or married or divorced or widowed, God's intention is for us to love one another. People can refer to all sorts of laws to justify their actions or to criticize others. God is concerned with only one sort of justification: the intentions of our hearts.