

The Word Behind the Words

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27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 22)
Mark 10: 2-16

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Danielle and I recently learned that the parents of one of our dear friends from high school were getting a divorce. Having known this friend for so long, and having known her parents as well, Danielle and I had to admit that we weren't shocked to hear the news. Even back in high school it appeared that the two were essentially living separate lives within the same household. Our friend believes that this divorce may bring more happiness to both of them, so she is not devastated, but she is saddened by it. Even though she is 30 and has a life of her own, the fact that her parents are divorcing shakes at the foundations of her identity. It seems that even in the best of divorces, people feel hurt. Unfortunately, as we all know, not all divorces are the best of divorces. Marriage, like all of human relationship is fraught with the possibility of getting hurt.

Even if we haven't been divorced, or even had a close friend or family member go through a divorce, we all know about broken or strained relationships. Whether between parents and children, children and parents, siblings, other relatives or friends, who among us hasn't found a change in the status of a relationship over time. I have to admit that I have plenty of moments, plenty of feelings, that I'm less than proud of when it comes to various relationships throughout my life. Some relationships have survived my carelessness and blundering, and some have not.

Texts like today demand the utmost care as they strike at the core of our identities. Divorce in particular, and relationships in general are sensitive for the gospel is about nothing if it isn't about relationship. This sermon is not about guilt. It is not about people feeling bad for the way they've been treated or the way they've treated others. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Good News found in our scriptures is not read to heap guilt upon people already hurting. The easiest thing to do would be to ignore texts like this one, to simply skip over them and pretend that they aren't there. While this may be the easiest thing for a preacher, or a person reading their bibles to do, it isn't the most faithful thing to do. As I've said before, a living faith is hard work.

There are several different ways of understanding this passage. Some scholars have sought to understand the historical situation in which this text was written. By understanding that women were in an extremely vulnerable situation once divorced some scholars have argued that Jesus is really showing how bad it is for women who would be turned out on the streets with no safety net to provide for them. Jesus opposes divorce, they argue, because is a justice issue. Given what we know about how Jesus responded to the various groups of exposed and marginalized, this explanation makes sense to me. The idea that Jesus opposed divorce because it left women in a terribly vulnerable place makes sense to me, but a closer reading of the text reveals Jesus talking about more than just divorce.

This passage has something to say to us today, something much stronger and more important than Jesus' message about divorce, or about Jesus' desire for us to stand with the oppressed and to break down structures which benefit the powerful at the expense of the disempowered. This passage illustrates to me, how people use the words

of the Bible to divide and tear down, rather than to unify and to build up. How people will use the words of the Bible to defend certain ideological positions, but ignore the great message of the text from which they are quoting. This passage begins with the idea that the Pharisees have set out to test Jesus. And to test him, they ask him a seemingly innocent question: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (Mark 10:2) See what the Pharisees know, and what Jesus certainly knows, is that Herod of Antipas was in charge of the region in which this scene takes place. They also know that Herod had been divorced and remarried. What the Pharisees also know, and Jesus also knows is that also in the region were a group of religious conservatives who believed that divorce was wrong, despite what the law of Deuteronomy said. The Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus into putting himself in one camp or another. Would he stand against the ruler, or would he stand against the religious community. They know what Deuteronomy 24 (see verses 1-4) says, as Jesus makes clear when he asks them what Moses teaches on the subject. They know that the law allows for divorce, so their question isn't an honest question, it is a trapping question, it is a divisive question. They want to put Jesus on public record as either being against the king, or against the religious community.

I'm guessing this tactic sounds familiar to many of you considering our own current political situation. One group quoting scripture at another, that group quoting scripture back, each trying to muster biblical evidence about what we should or shouldn't believe and allow legally. It is a trap. It was a trap for Jesus and it is a trap for us.

But of course, Jesus is too smart to be so easily caught up in their pigeon holing, litmus testing, encampment building schemes. Instead of having the conversation in terms of what the law allows, Jesus shifts the conversation to what does God intend.

How are we called to live with one another? Do we understand the blessings which God has given us in living together in community and on what grounds we must be willing to break those relationships. Jesus knows scripture, he knows what Deuteronomy 24 says about divorce, and he simply appeals to what is for him, a higher authority. He says that God wants us to be united as one. That marriage is a blessing. That we should not so easily let our own hard-heartedness destroy what is precious in God's sight. Jesus was talking specifically about marriage here, but I don't think it is a stretch to lay the same claim on all relationships. We are blessed by a good and loving God. We are blessed at finding others who care for us and others to care for. We are blessed to live in community, even with all its perils (as Mike so eloquently preached last week). All of us have a hardness of heart at times, but thankfully we worship a God of Grace and a God of new beginnings. Our past failings do not remove us from the unbroken circle of God's love.

I don't know why my friend's parents decided to officially end their marriage. I don't know why this year instead of last year, or instead of a year from now. I know that even as they know it is for the best, it comes with some pain and some loss. And I know that the Gospel is about healing and the binding of wounds, joining together and not the tearing apart. I know that the God we worship would rather they find joyous living outside of marriage than destructive and painful relationship inside of marriage. Is it too radical an idea to believe that God wants us as God's children to find joy and peace even as we seek to be faithful disciples? I'm not saying the Good news is always touchy feely, or whatever feels good do it, but I do think, that as Jesus so clearly describes in this passage, that the question should not be is it lawful, but what does God intend for us.

When we look at the entirety of the scriptures, when we look at the whole of Christian tradition, when we apply our God given ability for reason, and when we draw upon our lived experience, what do we understand about what God desires for us? Who are we called to be in relationships with one another?

As we move further into the season of politics, we will increasingly be bombarded with people and parties who will seek to garner our votes, often based on where we stand on divisive issues. Our faith *should* be a part of those decisions. I'm not one who believes we can or should separate our faith from our politics, for if our faith is a living faith, then it should inform everything we do. However, as Christians have a wonderfully complex tradition and we should not allow politicians and pundits to cheapen it with shallow arguments aimed at sound bites and bumper stickers. We can easily be pigeon-holed, litmus-tested, and wedge-issued into one camp or another. But it is a trap. It was a trap for Jesus and its a trap for us. There are those who want to ask the question "what does the law allow" but we are compelled, I believe, to ask the much larger, much more difficult, but also much more meaningful question: "What does God want for us, as people living together in community?" How are we to treat one another, how are we to care for one another and ourselves, how do we lift up Christian ideas like forgiveness and grace as virtues central to how we think, how we act, and yes even how we vote?

When asked a question about what is lawful, Jesus reflects on a creation story from Genesis. All of us are made in God's own image. We were created to be in relationship, in community and we would do well to treat one another with that in mind.