

Sunday, October 6, 2024
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22B)

Mark 10.2-16

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/9212876118727374>

(Sermon begins at about 25:25)

“Models for the Kingdom of God”

Once again, the Pharisees are testing Jesus, trying to trick him into saying something blasphemous, something they could use as evidence of heresy. And once again, Jesus sidesteps the trap and, in the process, turns the tables on the Pharisees, presenting a masterful, albeit subtle condemnation of the religious authorities. This time, the subject of discussion is marriage and divorce. While Jesus ultimately succeeds in making marriage and divorce a metaphor for relationship with God, before we go there, we need to take a look at some of the nuances of marriage and divorce as viewed in Jesus’ time.

As we heard in our Gospel reading, some Pharisees come to Jesus and ask, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” A simple enough question. But even in asking it, implying that it is potentially a thorny issue. If this is the subject of a test, then the issue must be controversial enough, divisive enough, that any answer Jesus gives would be unpopular with someone. Typical tactic of the Pharisees: sow seeds of doubt about Jesus’ credentials, create division among the masses. Sound familiar?

So as not to step in it too quickly, Jesus asks the Pharisees what the law actually says. After all, that is a good starting point. One that cannot be refuted. Subject to interpretation, yes. Refuted, no. The Pharisees paraphrase the requirements regarding divorce as presented in Deuteronomy chapter 24. Although the text actually reads, “Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house” (Deut 24.1). Jesus notes that this law was put in place because of “hardness of heart.” Meaning that it was necessary to have some guardrails to protect marriage because some men did not have regard for the sanctity of the marriage covenant and were divorcing their wives for no good reason. Burn the toast? You’re outa here. Just feel like a newer, younger model? You’re outa here. Although, truth be told, having the only criteria for divorce being that the man finds something objectionable about his wife hardly seems adequate justification. That leaves some pretty big loopholes.

Also, one important thing to note before we get to Jesus’ assessment is that under Jewish law, it was only the man who could initiate divorce. A woman was not permitted to divorce her husband, no matter what he might have done. Remember, theirs was not an egalitarian society. Marriage was not an equal partnership. The wife and children were considered the man’s property. They had no rights. Period. Women and children were primarily dependent on marriage—and the good graces of the man as husband and father—to provide for their wellbeing.

Once the Pharisees have laid out their understanding of divorce, Jesus begins his carefully reasoned assessment. First noting that laws about divorce were only necessitated because of the “hardness of heart,” because of the stubbornness some had when it came to the subject. He goes on to note that from the very beginning, God intended marriage to be two people coming together in a covenantal relationship, in which the two would become “one flesh.” With this union being a lifetime commitment: “what God has joined together, let no one separate.” The implication Jesus is making without actually saying it is that the law the Pharisees cited effectively violates God’s original vision. So, Jesus has successfully acknowledged the letter of the law, while also noting that it is an accommodation of human whimsy, not an expression of the divine ideal. And therein lies the problem. If anything, Jesus’ response, prefaced by the “hardness of heart” of men seeking divorce, juxtaposed with God’s original intention about marriage, effectively condemns the patriarchal ethos and practice of male-initiated divorce-on-demand. A practice that often left women destitute and children suffering as collateral damage. Which, in and of itself, highlights God’s concern for those who are powerless in society. In this case, women and children.

We don’t know the Pharisees’ reaction to this approach. Certainly, they had no justification to refute Jesus’ assessment. If anything, it probably left them with more questions than answers. So, if not a win for Jesus, at the very least, a stalemate. Although in private with his disciples, Jesus continues the assessment, putting an egalitarian spin on it. While equating remarriage with adultery, he does note that both men and women actually have equal agency: “whoever divorces his wife . . . and if she divorces her husband.”

Perhaps a statement of his position on equality of the sexes in marriage, or maybe a recognition that in practice, there had been a divergence from the Biblical law in favor of a more Greco-Roman understanding of marriage and divorce. One in which both partners were on a little more equal footing, at least with respect to the ability to initiate divorce. This evolving understanding would have likely been due to the influences of secular society, given Palestine’s occupation by the Roman Empire. Nonetheless, a recognition that the ideal for marriage is two people to strive to become “one flesh,” to be a unified whole, in which both are equal partners. And if there are problems with the marriage, divorce is a last resort, to be used not when one partner is not pleased with the other, but when the partnership becomes injurious to one or both partners. Again, emphasizing the inherent equality of both partners. Something not accommodated under Jewish divorce law.

Jesus demonstrates society’s evolving understanding, his evolving understanding, about the nature of marriage, particularly as a reflection of covenant relationship. And, of course, our understanding has continued to evolve throughout the 2,000 since the time of Jesus. Given this ever-evolving landscape it is best for our purposes to not focus on strict legal requirements and interpretations of the law, but rather on underlying principles. Which is ultimately what Jesus is doing, as well.

Looking at the Gospel passage, the underlying principle Jesus is ultimately talking about is preserving the dignity and wellbeing of the partners in marriage. And if that is not possible, then to take appropriate actions—i.e., divorce—to seek to reestablish and maintain the dignity

and wellbeing of both. If anything, highlighting the importance of dignity and wellbeing for the woman and any children produced by the marriage. Which becomes the image for Jesus' central point about the inherent dignity and wellbeing of all God's people, which is, in turn, a fundamental principal of the kingdom of God. All the talk about marriage and divorce leading ultimately to deeper understanding of the nature of the kingdom of God.

What then follows is a situation that presents yet another opportunity for a lesson about the nature of the kingdom of God. As we are told, after his debriefing with the disciples, people brought children to Jesus to be blessed. Still stuck in old patterns, still not completely having internalized the lesson about the dignity and wellbeing of all people—including children—the disciples are indignant at what is happening. To which Jesus responds, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

Given the place of children in any culture, and particularly the place of children in first century Palestinian culture, it is pretty apparent what Jesus meant. Perhaps most obvious is the fact that, by their very nature, children are vulnerable; dependent upon others for their care and wellbeing. The kingdom of God belongs to those who are vulnerable precisely because the kingdom of God is a place of care and nurture. Aren't we all vulnerable in one way or another? Aren't we all in need of care and nurture at one time or another? It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

It is likely that the other qualities Jesus refers to in his statement about children being those that the kingdom of God belongs is the innocence that children possess. The ability to trust what they experience without preconceived notions. That they are willing to unconditionally embrace God's love and grace which are unconditionally offered. Children are naturally full of curiosity, wanting to explore the world around them. Doing so with open minds and open hearts. Being filled with curiosity, open to exploring the mystery and wonder of God's creation. Eager to fully experience what God freely offers. Fully experiencing it as God intended.

When confronted with a plot on the part of the Pharisees to test him, to try to discredit him for potentially heretical or blasphemous ideas, Jesus is able to take a question about a seemingly innocuous issue as Jewish practices about divorce and turn it into a nuanced assessment illustrating the nature of the kingdom of God. Taking a legal and institutional practice surrounding separation and alienation, and using it to highlight a central theme of God's kingdom: inclusion. There is only one caveat. One condition. That in order to receive the kingdom of God, we need to do so as a little child.

Of course, Jesus is not saying that access to the kingdom of God is limited to children. In saying "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it," Jesus is inviting all of us to rediscover those childlike qualities we once had. Those childlike qualities that are still in there somewhere, waiting to be released. He is inviting us to approach the kingdom of God with the same vulnerability, with the same wonder and awe, with the same curiosity, with the same open-mindedness and open-heartedness with which we experienced life in our childhood. Jesus is inviting us to playfully explore the vast richness and mystery the kingdom of God has to offer.