

“Adultery, Divorce, Remarriage and Just Relationships Between Men and Women!”

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Scriptures

Mark 10:1-12

Mark 10:1 He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them. 2 Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" 3 He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" 4 They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." 5 But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 6 But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female.' 7 "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, 8 and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." 10 Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11 He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; 12 and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Sermon

I don't think I've ever given a sermon on divorce?
Or on remarriage or even adultery for that matter?
But in my younger years I definitely heard a few!

Back in the little country church of my youth, the topic of divorce was a big deal and it was tearing apart not only my little church, but much of the larger Mennonite church as well.

It was the 70's and many social norms in the U.S. were undergoing dramatic changes and divorce was one of them.

No longer taboo, nearly every extended family had at least one member who had been through a divorce.

Most everyone by the end of the 70's had a friend, or at least an acquaintance, who had been divorced.

Even in rural Kansas and even in the Mennonite church (which historically is several decades behind most mainstream accommodations of changing social norms), divorce was occurring with ever greater frequency.

Nearly every congregation was struggling to respond.
Should divorced couples be disciplined? Even excommunicated?

What happens when both are members of the church, does one stay and the other leave? What about the kids? What do we do if they want to remarry?

I know for my mom and folks of her generation, divorce and remarriage were sins and it troubled her greatly. She was often torn between wanting to support those families going through a divorce, while at the same time, wanting to not be misunderstood that she approved.

Eventually, and in fairly quick order, most local congregations and the larger church seemed to simply move on. I think this was mostly due to the fact that the reality was such that kicking folks out of the church was a far too painful option. The numbers were just too high, and every remaining member would have had to say goodbye to a friend or family member.

Now, more than 40 years later, any reflections into this subject seems rather immaterial. It is a non-issue.

So, what is my point in sharing that bit of recent church history with you all? Well, I suppose that in my childhood experience, just like today in our seemingly never ending discussions (at least on a national level) about the inclusion of sexual minorities, there were and are, well-meaning folks on either side?

I know this for a fact, since my mother and I were on opposite sides. We both appealed to the same holy scriptures to defend our positions. But the scripture we just read I feel has been misunderstood and misused, so I would like to look at it a bit closer with you all, since I believe that it deals with far more important issues than simply divorce, remarriage and adultery.

Now if you have been paying attention, you'll have noticed that I have been working my way backwards in the gospel of Mark. As I mentioned last Sunday, a distinct narrative section began in 9:33 with Jesus' declaration of the radical upside down-ness of God's Kingdom!

The community of those who want to follow Jesus is to be prominently populated by those who the larger society considered least valuable and who had the least social power. Last week, in the passage that follows this morning's, it was children, the very least of the least,

who Jesus brought into the center of the communal life,
highlighting the fact that their needs are of primary importance.

The way of God's people is justice and that just rule must include
the basic structure of every society, the family.
And that basic social unit begins with two folks getting' hitched somehow.

Those radical thoughts on children that Jesus had shared
and that I covered last week, were prefaced by an even more profound
challenge to his society that was to radically reorient
the most intimate of social relationships between men and women.

Now the fact that women should to be accorded equal rights
and responsibilities as men
(though still to be fully realized in our society)
is a goal most of us would embrace.
But for those in Jesus audience this would have been crazy talk!
And if they had known the existence of Mars at that time,
they would have likely thought he had originated there.

It wasn't that the subject of divorce wasn't a topic in his day, it was.
The prominent Jewish schools of Hillel and Shammai
were actually heatedly debating (as rabbis often do) the topic.

So a Pharisee raised the topic with Jesus
(an up and coming self-proclaimed and self-taught teacher)
in an attempt to trap him into taking sides.

But Jesus refused to take the bait and in typical Jesus fashion
responded to the Pharisee with a question of his own.
The Pharisee easily recited the common practice
that had, supposedly been given to them directly from Moses.

Only men could initiate divorce proceedings.
Simple, clear, concise and very convenient for some in that society.
Not only did women not have any reciprocal rights in this situation,
but once they had been cast out of the extended family unit
they would be socially and religiously ostracized.

Those women and sometimes their children would have been cursed
to live in poverty with few options for scraping out their survival.
One of the few options, for some, was prostitution.
Perhaps some of the female "sinners" in the gospel stories,
whom Jesus encountered were such women,

forced into adultery because of divorce?

But the bottom line was, divorce was a reality in Jesus' day and there were allowances for it, according to Jewish law. Jesus did not seem to be trying to change that fact. Instead he cuts to the heart of the issue, by reminding those in charge, that Moses' law was actually a compromise, an accommodation, to patriarchal power, or the hardened hearts of men.

Jesus did not reject Moses' authority as a human instrument to communicate God's will for communal life. But Jesus was warning those, who were now implementing the rules. After all, even the great Moses was still a human and thus could have been tempted to soften some of God's commands?

"If ya really wanna know what God desires, then go to the very source," Jesus proclaims, with perhaps a wry smile cutting across his face. And what Jesus did here was just simply masterful as his rhetoric mastered his opponents. It's just so clever!

For you see the entire society, religious and cultural, was fully committed to a strict and thorough hierarchal structure. Jesus took that whole world view and turned it back on them.

The religious establishment claimed its authority was from Moses. Moses not only gave the law to them (the priesthood) but only they had the right to interpret those laws!

But where did Moses get his law? Hmm... that's right, go ahead, say it... Moses' authority was given to him from the very creator, aka, the Lord, aka, the Lord God Almighty, aka Yahweh, or the very source of being, the divine mystery, etc.

Long before little ole Moses was found floating in a basket among the reeds along the Nile, God from the very beginning had already declared expectations for how creation should relate to each other.

Yep, the old "leave and cleave" so often mentioned at weddings. Where the man leaves, divests himself of his former life and family and even all the wealth and power of his former extended family unit, to create a whole new intimate reality with another. Two individuals become one flesh living together in equality and unity.

But according to Jesus, the religious authorities in his day were actually using divorce as a wedge to separate and divide the original unity that was part of God's original plan.

Jesus in no way was prohibiting divorce, but he did challenge the self-serving, patriarchal interpretations and practices of his day. And then, when he was alone, with just his disciples, Jesus dropped the word for "divorce" for the word "to separate." Separation of course is the opposite of unity.

Also, in that later conversation, it would appear that Jesus was more concerned with remarriage than with divorce? But before we start trying to kick out folks who have gotten remarried... Let's keep in focus what I think his real point was.

According to the interpreters of Moses' law, men did not face any consequences in divorce proceedings. In private, however, Jesus explains that men, in God's community, will not only face consequences, but will be held to a higher standard. Because when the ex-husband now remarries, he commits adultery, but by also dismissing his ex-wife, he is responsible for forcing her into a situation of adultery if she remarries. If the ex-wife chooses to remarry, she is responsible only for her own sin.

But wait, there is more crazy talk from Jesus as he ends his private instructions, indicating that women also have the right to even petition for divorce! That additional little clause completely contradicted the larger society's current social practice.

Now divorce is serious business and not something to be considered lightly. However, I think Jesus goes far beyond just divorce and remarriage and is more interested in how we conduct ourselves in all relationships.

All relationships, either intimate or casual, must be just! All of our relationships must be based upon the fundamental principles of mutuality, equality and reciprocity.

We need to recognize our own social privileges, vis a vis others, and divest when necessary in order to lift up those of lower status. We must truly value the folks who are weaker and ostracized by taking their wants, needs and desires seriously.

And for those of us who are sitting on a lower rung of social privilege, we too must be willing to challenge those above us to share their social power. In his summary, Jesus was increasing the equality and power of women in both the family as well as in the larger society.

The great and glorious Kingdom of God is not merely some intellectual concept or some spiritual reality that occurs in some faraway heaven, "light years away!" God' rule is something that happens right here and right now. It is real and it starts at home within our most intimate relationships. In the end it's all about how we treat one another.

The family, in both Jesus' time as well as in our own, is the basic social system of every culture. Jesus' teachings (last week about the care of children) and today, regarding divorce, emphasize that Jesus' way is better described as a Kin-dom rather than a royal Kingdom.

It is all about the quality of our relationships, of what I call, radically reoriented relationships. It is a family where love, peace, justice, and unity are our highest ideals. And as I stressed last week, it can be a small nuclear unit or a large extend group related by DNA.

But most excitingly it can also be a motley collection of folks, united by their common desire to find their worth within the love of God, and their common commitment to following the life and teachings of Jesus. And lastly, folks enabled to love those both inside and outside of this new family as they discover how to love themselves.

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