



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 19
Proper 22 (B)

A Hard Saying

[RCL] Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

Today may be a Sunday when the preacher and the congregation are of one heart and one mind: the preacher doesn't want to deliver a sermon on divorce and the congregation doesn't want to hear a sermon on divorce. Likely many preachers have looked at our Gospel lesson from Mark, Jesus' teaching on divorce, and said to themselves, "This would be a good Sunday to focus on the Epistle lesson." And this could all go pretty well. Except for the fact that after the service there is always a person who says something like, "Thank you for your sermon today. I found it helpful. But I was wondering about the Gospel lesson and Jesus' statements on divorce, because my daughter is going through this rough time..." And then you get a wrenching story of parents, spouses, children going through the heartbreak of divorce. A sermon on Jesus' prohibition of divorce in Mark's Gospel may not be an easy thing for the preacher or the congregation. But people – especially those who are struggling with divorce and genuinely want to know how their faith connects with their lives – deserve to hear what Jesus has to say, even if it is not easy.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is engaged in a debate with some Pharisees over the issue of divorce. They ask him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Now, there are indications that this wasn't a sincere question. Mark tells us they asked this question in order "to test" Jesus. Rather than seeking an answer to an honest question, they were trying to set a trap, because in the Judaism of Jesus' day, the legality of a husband divorcing a wife wasn't in question. It was permitted. The debate centered around the conditions under which divorce was permitted; the more stringent side saying it was permitted only in cases of serious sexual misconduct and the less stringent side saying it was permitted even if the husband simply no longer found his wife pleasing. Therefore, in asking Jesus whether divorce was legal, they were really trying to catch Jesus contradicting the law. Perhaps they had heard that Jesus taught that divorce was prohibited. If they could get him to say so publicly, they could discredit him or at least disgrace him.

In good Jewish fashion, Jesus responds to the Pharisees' question with one of his own: "What did Moses command you?" The Pharisees in reply refer to Deuteronomy 24:1: "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." Jesus reveals their disingenuousness. They had this bible verse in their back pocket and were waiting to pounce on Jesus for contradicting the scriptures. But Jesus responds in two ways. First, he says it was because of your hardness of heart that Moses wrote this commandment for folks like you. Here, Jesus is saying permission for a man to divorce his wife was a

regrettable allowance for certain people's spiritual blindness, with the strong implication being that it was for folks like the Pharisees and their spiritual ancestors. Second, Jesus trumps one piece of scripture (Deuteronomy 24:1) with other pieces of scripture (Gen. 1:27; 2:24) saying: "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.'" Jesus goes beyond the passage from Deuteronomy to God's original intentions for marriage in creation. He sees these passages as more directly applicable to the question at hand, and, in his view, as prohibiting divorce. Jesus, therefore, concludes his argument by saying, "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." The Pharisees, who tried to catch Jesus contradicting scripture, are shown to be hard-hearted, spiritually blind opponents who themselves fail to understand the scriptures. The proof-texting gambit with Jesus doesn't work out as planned.

Later, when Jesus is alone with his disciples, they again ask about divorce. He tells them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Here, Jesus does two interesting things. First, he extends the logic of his prohibition of divorce to say that if someone divorces and remarries, they commit adultery. This follows because if the first marriage remains in effect, then entering into a second marriage is adulterous. Second, he speaks of the scenario of a wife divorcing her husband. This really wasn't an option in the Judaism of Jesus' day (though there may have been some fringe exceptions). In Judaism, it was really a question only about the legality of a husband divorcing a wife. To divorce or not was the prerogative of Jewish men – not women. In Roman law, wives could divorce their husbands, so perhaps Jesus was offering a nod in the direction of gentiles in his prohibition of divorce.

The courageous preacher who has come this far in his or her sermon on Jesus' prohibition of divorce usually, in my experience, tries to go on to soften the seeming harshness of Jesus' teaching. Yes, understanding the context of the passage has helped some, but it still comes across as one of Jesus' so-called "hard sayings". Perhaps the wisest thing would be to end here and to just allow the people of God to sit for a Sunday with the incongruity of a Jesus who doesn't always say things we like to hear. And yet, preachers are also pastors, and we no doubt know good and faithful parishioners, pillars of the church even, who happen to be divorced. We love them and we know that they did not divorce lightly but for very good reasons. They often grieve the end of their marriages, and yet also believe that their marriages needed to end. And many preachers oftentimes agree. The Episcopal Church does too, in as much as it has allowed divorced parishioners to remarry (given certain conditions which have evolved over the last century or so). This is not intended to diminish the esteem in which we hold the ideal of lifelong commitment in marriage. But in our sinful and broken world, sometimes we recognize that marriages need to end, even if such endings are painful and tragic. So, we try to say more.

Preachers who try to soften the harshness of Jesus' prohibition of divorce usually take one of three approaches. The first approach, let's call "Jesus protects the wellbeing of women." The idea here is that, in the Judaism of Jesus' day, wives were dependent on their marriages for their physical, economic, and social wellbeing. Since divorce in Judaism was the sole prerogative of husbands, this placed married women in a

very precarious position. A divorced woman was very vulnerable in first century Israel and if a husband had the right to divorce his wife, in some teachers' eyes even for trivial matters, a woman's wellbeing was quite dependent on the steadfastness or whims of her husband. Jesus' prohibition of divorce can therefore be seen as a way of protecting women.

The second approach is related to the first. Let's call it "Jesus introduces reciprocity in marriage." The idea here is that Jesus criticized the patriarchal understanding of marriage found in the Judaism of his day and introduced a note of equality and reciprocity in marriage. We have already seen that the question in Judaism at the time of Jesus was about the rights of a husband to divorce his wife. A wife didn't have a reciprocal right and in fact was pretty much viewed as a husband's property. That's why, technically speaking, the Old Testament views adultery as a property violation against a husband, a form of stealing a man's property by taking his wife. By definition, adultery could only be committed against a man because the husband was not regarded in any reciprocal sense as the property of the wife. Therefore, when Jesus says that a man who divorces his wife and remarries commits adultery against his wife, Jesus introduces something new into the understanding of marriage. He is saying that a wife also has an equal and reciprocal right to the sexual fidelity of her husband. Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage introduces a remarkable equality and reciprocity between husband and wife.

The third attempt to soften Jesus' prohibition of divorce let's call the "We're all sinners" approach. The idea here is to point out the ways in which we have all failed to live up to Jesus' teachings. Anybody here ever been angry with another member of the church or insulted them? Anybody holding onto unforgiveness? Divorce must be seen in the context of all the ways people fail to live up to the demands of the Gospel. The good news is that for all our failings God offers forgiveness. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and all of us are dependent on God's free gift of grace by which we are made right with God. In this sense, divorced persons are no different from anybody else. We're all sinners.

There is something to be said for each of these approaches. However, I would like to offer an additional way of looking at this text by viewing it in light of other New Testament passages about divorce. This will enable us, I hope, to see a certain development within the New Testament that can provide us with a scriptural warrant for the permissibility of divorce under certain conditions and for very good pastoral reasons.

There are only a handful of other passages in the New Testament dealing with divorce. In Luke, there is only one verse, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery" (Luke 16:18), which basically reiterates the prohibition of divorce and remarriage that we find in Mark's Gospel. In Matthew's Gospel, however, we find a significant development. In Matthew's version of Jesus' debate with the Pharisees, Jesus says, "Whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery" (Matt. 19:9). Here we see what people refer to as Matthew's "exception clause." It is repeated in Matthew 5:32: "I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery." Scholars debate what the exact nature of this "unchastity" may or may not be, but for our

purposes, we need not delve into the details. The important point is that in the Gospel of Matthew we find passages which acknowledge an exception to the absolute prohibition of divorce that we find in Mark's Gospel.

The only other New Testament passage that deals directly with divorce comes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In this passage, we also find Paul permitting divorce under certain circumstances. However, he does so in a highly significant way. Paul clearly knows of Jesus' prohibition of divorce. In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, he says, "To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband) and that the husband should not divorce his wife." Paul's phrase "not I but the Lord," shows he knows what Jesus taught about divorce and remarriage. And yet later in the passage Paul goes on to say that it is permissible for a Christian who is married to a non-Christian to separate from their non-believing spouse. Significantly, Paul prefaces these remarks by saying, "To the rest I say – I and not the Lord—that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever..." (1 Cor. 7:12). With the phrase "I say—I and not the Lord" Paul acknowledges that he is going beyond what he knows Jesus to have said about divorce and remarriage. Nonetheless, Paul is confronted with a situation in which people who have become Christians are still married to their non-Christian spouses. Paul's counsel is that Christians with non-believing spouses who consent to remain married ought to remain married. But, if it is not possible for the non-believing spouse to remain married to his or her Christian spouse, Paul says separation is permitted. Paul says, "If the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you" (1 Cor. 7:15). Under these circumstances, Paul permits a Christian to divorce. Paul is clear that it is he who is saying this, not Jesus. And yet, given the circumstances, Paul believes it is permitted because God calls us to live in peace.

When Jesus' absolute prohibition of divorce in Mark is seen in the context of other New Testament passages, it seems as though the New Testament prohibition of divorce is not so absolute. It is clear that the New Testament is consistent in seeing the lifelong commitment between a husband and a wife as an extremely important aspect of Christian discipleship. Marriage is held up as a lifelong covenant that is to reflect God's faithfulness and God's love. And yet in Matthew, we see an exception that permits divorce in cases of serious sexual impropriety and in Paul we see permission to divorce when an unbelieving spouse no longer wishes to remain married to a Christian. In the New Testament itself, therefore, we find a process of moral reflection and pastoral adaptation that allows for divorce under certain circumstances. Taken together, these New Testament passages suggest a scriptural basis for the ongoing moral reflection upon and pastoral adaptation of Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage. I am not suggesting that the church ought to simply accommodate itself to the prevailing cultural norms and assumptions about marriage and divorce. What I am saying is that the New Testament itself envisions a faithful moral and pastoral engagement with Jesus' prohibition of divorce in light of the ongoing demands of discipleship. In our day, for example, I think we have to say that in situations of violence and abuse divorce is permissible. Sometimes, tragically and regrettably, ending a marriage will be the right thing to do. We should be clear about the moral and pastoral reason why we think this is so. And we should, like Paul, be clear that it is we

-- and not Jesus -- who make this call. Nonetheless, the whole of the New Testament witness permits us to see this as a faithful response.

I'm not too sure how the preacher and the congregation will feel after such a sermon on divorce. I don't know any rousing divorce hymns to use for the recessional. And yet maybe some important conversations will ensue between the pastor and members of the congregation or amongst parishioners themselves. And maybe that person whose daughter is going through a rough time in her marriage will thank you for not running away from the Gospel lesson, but rather trying to deal with it as faithfully and fairly as you could even if it was sometimes hard to hear. A person who is struggling with divorce and sincerely wants to know what Jesus and the church have to say about it deserves at least that much.

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