

## “A Place At The Table”

### I.

This looks like a train wreck: the young, happily married minister will now preach a sermon from a text about divorce. Many of you have been divorced; I never have, and I'm not entirely sure what business I have preaching to you about it. I thought about calling in sick this morning—can we do that?—but here I am, and here you are, so I guess we should make a go of it.

I can not begin to imagine how it must feel to hear this passage as a divorced person. If I were divorced, and walked into church today only to get broadsided by the Bible, I would feel awful. I would feel judged and condemned and unwelcome. This is a hard text to hear.

So let me say two things about this passage, right up front. First, at Plymouth we take the Bible seriously, but we do not take the Bible literally. In this instance, that might mean paying a little less attention to what Jesus *says* in this passage and a little more attention to what Jesus *does* in this passage. He actually models here for us a faithful way of reading and responding to difficult passages of Scripture—including this one. When the Pharisees quote the Bible to him on the subject of divorce, Jesus does not fold in the face of their proof text. He simply says, in so many words, “That does not sound like the loving God that I know.”

Could we do that? Could we respond to the Bible the way that Jesus does here? Because some parts of this passage do not sound like the loving God that *I* know in Jesus Christ. Divorce is always a tragic and terrible failure. But if you are divorced, you already know that. And I don't think this passage was placed in the Bible in order to make you feel even worse about yourself.<sup>1</sup>

Besides—and this is the second thing I want to say right up front—this isn't really a text about divorce. It isn't even a text about marriage. Jesus may talk about marriage in this passage, but marriage is not the *point* of this passage. Jesus takes no interest in the subject of marriage in the abstract, or for its own sake. Marriage matters to Jesus for other reasons. It points beyond itself; it serves here as a sign and a symbol of the new world that God has promised.

And *that* is the point of this passage: It is all about the reign of God.

### II.

On the road again: that is where we find Jesus in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus and the disciples had been off by themselves, as he has tried to teach them about the strange and unsettling customs of the reign of God -that perplexing place where those who truly want to get ahead need to go to the bottom of the status ladder, where even the children are welcome, where everything gets turned upside down. But now the private seminar comes to a close; Jesus reenters public ministry. Surrounded once more by the crowds, he sets his sights on Jerusalem: the place where all of this will lead, where he will be betrayed, rejected and killed.

Even embarking on this journey invites risk. Our passage opens with the Pharisees testing Jesus, trying to trip him up. Their weapon of choice? A loaded question: *Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?* This is no obscure inquiry about some arcane point in the law; in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, no less than in the 21<sup>st</sup>, marriage was a political hot potato. In a series of developments worthy of *The Jerry Springer Show*, King Herod had infamously divorced his wife in order to marry his own niece.<sup>2</sup> For daring to criticize this unconventional marital arrangement, John the

Baptist lost his head –and, no, that isn't a metaphor. Marriage and divorce is a dangerous question.

But like the Buddha before him--or maybe I'm thinking of Master Yoda--Jesus responds to their question with a question of his own: *What did Moses command you?* Well, that is an interesting point. As it turns out, the Law of Moses proved particularly favorable to one half of the human race in these matters. It made divorce into something of a perk for the Y chromosome crowd. A *man* desiring divorce simply drew up the proper papers, issued his wife a certificate of divorce, and sent her on the path to brutal, humiliating poverty. Women did not even have the right to ask for divorce.<sup>3</sup>

But Jesus is full of surprises. After the Pharisees have referred to the relevant statute, Jesus' response seems almost...dismissive: *Because of your hardness of heart<sup>4</sup> [Moses] wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female...So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together let no one separate.*

Do you see what Jesus just did there? Don't miss this; it is utterly crucial. The Pharisees have some religious rules that they like: rules that reinforce male privilege, rules that underscore the prerogatives of patriarchy, rules that serve to repress one half of the human race and do so in the name of God.

So Jesus tells them to take their rules and stick them where the sun don't shine. (That's a rough translation from the original Greek). He reaches back behind the rules and refers to the original intention of a loving Creator. Go read the Book of Genesis, says Jesus. There you will find that God did not make men superior and women inferior from the beginning. God made them male and female –fully and equally human.<sup>5</sup> And God did not make marriage as an instrument for the oppression of women; God made marriage so that two might become one in a loving and mutual partnership; a meeting of equals. In the light of God's original intention, marriage must not serve to bolster the oppressive status quo. Men do not have the right to draw up divorce papers and send wives on their way. *What God has joined together, let no one separate.*<sup>6</sup>

But the disciples find this all a little hard to swallow. They are also accustomed to male privilege; they also benefit from it, so they want to make sure they have heard this correctly. Maybe they want to look for loopholes. They ask Jesus about this matter again, this time in private. But his answer is still the same: Women and men are equal partners in marriage. And God will not look lightly on divorce.<sup>7</sup>

From there, the text takes a turn into more familiar territory: the story of Jesus taking the children in his arms and blessing them. We read this portion of Mark's Gospel every time we baptize a child here at Plymouth. But coming as it does on the heels of a marriage debate, this familiar old story starts to sound a little different. You see, bringing children to Jesus *also* violates male privilege. In a patriarchal society men in general, and big shot rabbis in particular, were not to be bothered with babies. So the disciples do the right thing, or so they think: they speak sternly to these people who have the nerve to bring their squirmy, snotty, screaming children to Jesus.

But did you notice Jesus' response? He sees this and he is *indignant*. The disciples still do not get in it. They are still trying to bar the entrance to the reign of God, still taking it upon themselves to decide who is in and who is out, who will be pushed aside and who gets to occupy center stage. So one more time, Jesus tries to tell them what this is all about: *“Let the children come to me...for it is to such as these that the reign of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever*

*does not receive the reign of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.*<sup>8</sup>

### III.

OK: we have dealt with marriage, and we have dealt with children, but maybe we need to take a step back, to put on the wide-angle lens. What is the larger point here? What is this really all about? In a phrase: the reign of God. What do we believe about the new world that God has promised? Does God’s reign reinforce the privilege of the powerful? Or does it upend the status quo? Does it ratify the oppressive rules of this present age, or does it break them in the name of radical hospitality? That is why marriage matters. That is why welcoming children matters. It all comes back to the reign of God.

But of course, with Jesus, it always does. Remember how Mark’s Gospel begins? The first words out of Jesus’ mouth are a summary of his entire message: “*The time is fulfilled and the reign of God has come near; repent and believe the good news.*” And the rest of Mark’s Gospel unfolds that one statement. In Jesus Christ, the reign of God comes near and we are invited to change.

It’s about learning to live in a world turned upside down. The world *we* know divides people into categories: those who matter, and those who do not; those who are acceptable and those who are not; those who are in and those who are out. But in the reign of God *all* are truly welcome. These stories simply serve to underscore the point that “all” means “*all*.” Even the women are welcome as equal partners in their own marriages. Even the children are welcome as human beings deserving dignity. Even the nobodies and the nonpersons, the forgotten and the overlooked and the people we just detest.<sup>9</sup> All are welcome and no one will be turned away. The reign of God comes near and we are invited to change.

So how about here? How about now? It can start with the invitation to this table. On this World Communion Sunday, Christians across the globe are sharing in the joyful feast. Here Christ calls us to a table where the dividing lines of race and class and color and nationality and orientation can finally fall away; where we continue to draw *in* all those who have been cast *out*; where everyone has a place and no one will be shown the door. This table teaches us about life in the reign of God: a life centered on the love of Christ, who gave himself up for us all; a life embracing all who would come to share in that love, life in a world where *everyone* has a place at the table.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This was one of those weeks where I really benefited from Plymouth's staff Bible study. My thanks to Angie, David, Jeanette and Stephanie for helping me think through the deeply difficult subject of divorce in this passage.

<sup>2</sup> The connection to John's martyrdom at the hand of Herod is also suggested by the geographic location. Chapter 10 verse 1 sets this story "in the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan" –the very territory where John the Baptist operated before his arrest. For more, see PHEME PERKINS' commentary in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp.641-647. Herod Antipas' soap opera-worthy antics are recounted in *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*. Edited by Paul J. Achtemeier. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p.419.

<sup>3</sup> So verse 12, which assumes that women *do* have the right to divorce, seems to reflect the context of Greco-Roman law which, unlike the Law of Moses, did allow women a right to divorce.

<sup>4</sup> A note from the cutting room floor: the Greek word here is *skleirokardia*, made up from the word *skleio*, source of the medical term "sclerosis" ("hardness") and *kardia*, a somewhat less obscure medical term.

<sup>5</sup> It is decisive for my interpretation to note that Jesus draws from the Priestly account of creation in Genesis chapter one, rather than the Old Epic tradition in chapter two. Chapter one forms a far more solid basis for establishing the basic equality of woman and man in creation. For an accessible treatment, see Marcus Borg's *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally*. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2001), pp. 57-81.

<sup>6</sup> One does not need to be a feminist in order to see this, just a careful reader of the text. Even John Calvin notes the way in which the Pharisees would deny equal partnership to women and how Jesus draws on the Genesis account in order to establish the equality of the two partners in marriage. See Calvin's *Commentary On a Harmony of the Evangelists*. Volume II. Translated by The Rev. William Pringle. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), pp.377-391.

<sup>7</sup> Another way to characterize the shift that Jesus makes here is from a discourse of rules and obligations to one of grace and gift. The latter is more freeing; it is also potentially far more demanding. See Lamar Williamson's *Mark in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for teaching and Preaching*. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1983), pp.174-182.

<sup>8</sup> I wish I had the imagination to notice this on my own, but I owe this insight to PHEME PERKINS as well.

<sup>9</sup> To try to say the same thing in a different way: Don Juel argues that Jesus does not seek to defend patriarchal marriage, not to shame the divorced, but to look after the well-being of women and children, who were the most vulnerable members of that society. *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts*. Edited by Roger E. Van Harn. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), pp.250-253.