

A couple weeks ago we talked about how different our modern view of children is from that of Jesus' contemporaries, and therefore how we have to relocate Jesus' words in their original context if we are to more accurately understand what he meant when he told the disciples they were to welcome a little child—the least and lowest in status in their society. Likewise today we have to acknowledge that marriage and divorce in our culture bear very little resemblance to marriage and divorce in ancient Israel. That's not to say that Jesus' words are irrelevant to us, only that again, as with all of this thousands-of-years-old scripture, we have to understand Jesus' context if we want to understand Jesus' teaching.

When I preach at weddings, today's gospel and its reference, today's passage from Genesis, are often the readings couples choose from the short list of suggested scripture. It's ironic, of course, because Jesus is only talking about marriage in the context of a discussion on divorce, which is not what most happy couples want to be thinking about on their wedding day. The problem is that scripture doesn't have too much to say about modern marriage as we know it. The Old Testament mostly narrates polygamy; the gospels feature 12 presumably single guys following around a presumably single leader; in the epistles, Paul treats marriage as a begrudging necessity for people who are too weak to stay single. Marriage in the ancient near east, and even for centuries after that, was usually not the result of two young people locking eyes across the college cafeteria, or being set up on a blind date by mutual friends, or scoring 93% compatibility in the algorithm of a digital dating app. Think about Mary, who we guess was around 14 when she had Jesus, but who was already engaged to Joseph before the angel Gabriel announced her pregnancy: I don't think Joseph picked her up in a bar; the marriage was arranged—and before his own angelic vision, Joseph planned to divorce her. Traditionally, marriage was an economic arrangement to consolidate and protect wealth and influence among families by ensuring legitimate, usually male heirs. That's why adultery was an offense that could be committed against a woman's father, who had to be able to marry her off, or against a woman's husband, who would worry that a child he presumed was his really wasn't, but it was not an offense that could be committed against a woman.

However, that was the human practice, not what God envisioned. Unlike the orderly six day creation narrative in the first chapter of Genesis, the author of the second chapter of Genesis give us a messier, trial-and-error account of how people came to be in community. In chapter 1, everything God creates up to and culminating in humankind is deemed "good." But in chapter

2, the human is alone, and this is “not good.” So God makes and parades every animal past the human as a potential partner, which if you think about it, is hilarious. Imagine the human looking at all of God’s suggested companions: *I will call this an aardvark, but this is not the right partner for me. I will call this one “elephant” but this is not the companion I was hoping for.* Until finally God creates another human being, and the human says, *At last this is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh*, which is the Hebrew idiom for *this The One*. But one more word that gets lost in translation here is *helper*, which in English we tend to use in terms of hierarchy, that the helper is subservient to the one being helped. But that word *helper* in Hebrew is most commonly used in scripture to talk about God—as in the psalms, *my refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble*—and we would certainly not say that God is subservient to men. From the beginning, God intended human community to be true partnership.

So it is humans’ hardness of heart that Jesus credits for obscuring God’s gift of human partnership, particularly within marriage. Mark explicitly tells us that the Pharisees are “testing” Jesus—whether for the genuine purpose of seeing if Jesus agrees with them or to get him in trouble as John the Baptist got in trouble when he criticized Herodias for divorcing Philip to marry his brother Herod. Divorce itself was not against the law, but the rabbis did argue about the circumstances under which a man could divorce his wife and still be considered righteous: some said it could be for any reason at all while some argued that divorce was only permissible in certain cases. The Pharisees treat this topic theoretically: *Let’s say, hypothetically, a man wants to divorce his wife...asking for a friend...* But Jesus addresses them directly: *What did Moses command YOU? It’s because of YOUR hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for YOU.* Jesus may suspect that the Pharisees are looking for loopholes for themselves, but he may just be reminding them that divorce causes real consequences for real people—marriage and divorce don’t happen in theory but in reality. In that culture, the real people who became collateral damage of divorce were women and the children they were raising—two groups who were already marginalized and vulnerable. That part hasn’t really changed: even now the leading cause of new poverty—that is, people who were living above the poverty line now living below it—is divorce, which still disproportionately impoverishes women and children. But even for those who survive separation economically, divorce—or more accurately the breakdown of the relationship that leads to divorce—is still socially and emotionally destructive. Jesus cautions against separating what God has joined together because when two become one flesh, ripping that apart hurts.

Jesus speaks to his disciples specifically about divorcing for the purpose of remarriage—and in doing so makes two revolutionary statements, first by expanding the commandment so that adultery becomes a sin men can commit against their wives, and second by suggesting that women should have equal agency to initiate divorce. Still, Jesus speaks against taking God's gift of marriage partnership, using it for awhile, and then trying to stick the tags back on to exchange it for something better. But as always, Jesus' concern is not about the personal piety of the one doing the divorcing, which is where the Pharisees are focused; Jesus' concern is for who gets hurt when we tend to ourselves at the expense of others. This whole argument takes place in the larger context of Jesus teaching the disciples to care for the least, the lost, and the lowliest. Here he advocates against a system and a practice that will create more vulnerability and suffering.

Divorce is still very much a part of our lives, whether we've been through it ourselves or navigated it with friends or family. So we've probably heard these passages misused and abused to manipulate, shame, and blame people who are already suffering through one of the most difficult and painful seasons of their lives—especially when we consider that by the time a legal separation is in the works, the damage is already done. There's nothing in this passage to suggest that Jesus wants to rubber stamp us because of papers we have or haven't filed at the courthouse. But Jesus does call us beyond human morality and legality to God's abundant vision for caring human community, whether we're married, divorced, single, widowed, dating, or it's complicated. God is with us in all of those circumstances; may we be with each other in them as well.