

P20B 2024 Mark 10:2-16, Genesis 2:18-24

You know I usually like to share a timely observation or personal anecdote to ease us into the day's scripture, but these are not easy texts. And if, like me, you are the one out of every two people whose marriage has ended in divorce, you've probably heard enough opinions, arguments, and judgements that you may not care what a two thousand year old single guy who spent his adult years camping with his guy friends has to say about your twenty-first century marriage. And if you've never been married, or you're married and have never seriously considered divorce, or you're widowed, or you're an LGBTQIA person whose experience is ignored in these readings, you may think there's nothing relevant here for you. But I'll challenge us all to find the good news in this scripture, regardless of what box we'd check on a survey to describe our marital status.

As always, we want to locate today's gospel in its full context. Mark comes right out and tells us that the Pharisees ask Jesus about the legality of divorce explicitly to test him. This tells us a couple of things: first, this topic was open for interpretation. You don't ask a world famous mathematician what 2+2 is to test them; there is no simple answer here. This, by the way, is why we are not biblical literalists: Jesus and his contemporaries were not literalists but debated the application of holy scripture. Mark framing this as a test also shows us that they are less interested in a honest exchange of ideas than they are in catching Jesus by his answer. And the stakes could not be higher: John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded because he criticized Herod for marrying his brother's ex-wife. If the Pharisees are trying to get rid of Jesus, forcing him to take a public stance that opposes the king would be a good way to do it.

The Pharisees ask their question as a hypothetical: *Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?* But Jesus engages them personally: *What did Moses command you? Your hardness of heart is why Moses gave you this loophole.* Whether the Pharisees were contemplating their own marriages or not, Jesus reminds them that this is not a theoretical discussion about abstract doctrines; their theology will have serious consequences for real people—as is always the case. These religious leaders were not uniquely legalistic or uncharitable, nor should we imagine Jesus swooping in to invent mercy and justice in a society where that was lacking. Though their laws surrounding marriage and divorce came out of a patriarchal culture that put women at a disadvantage, they had marriage contracts and the equivalent of prenuptial agreements. Jesus isn't just trying to stop them from turning women out into the street in destitution; he's setting the bar much higher.

Jesus references the second creation story in Genesis, where God sees that it's not good for the human to be alone and sets about creating potential partners: aardvarks, penguins, water buffalo—this part is supposed to be funny—but none of these animals make a suitable partner. So God makes a second human, who at last the man recognizes as part of himself. Although we can't really say Adam and Eve were formally married, this story is used to describe the way marriage

unites people so that they become one flesh, which Jesus says is the reason no one should separate them. Jesus doesn't tell the Pharisees or his disciples not to get divorced; Jesus says *let no one separate* what God has joined together because legality is not Jesus' main concern. Jesus cares about the people.

If you've ever had surgery that has separated some of your flesh, you know that separation is painful. I was too whacked out to remember, but I'm told in the first hour after I had surgery I clicked that little button 99 times. The metaphor of two becoming one flesh is accurate, because once that happens, separation hurts—but in that case, there's no little clicker. Now, the different types of marriages that we read about in the Bible are quite different from the institution as we know it today. Jesus' contemporaries would not have understood two people registering at Bed, Bath, and Beyond then sending invitations that say "Today I marry my best friend." So, the damage done by separation in modern marriage is different, but it's still harmful, and that's true in all sorts of relationships: friends, siblings, parents and children, partnerships of any kind; we hurt others and others hurt us when we act like we're not part of one another in community. The religious experts ask Jesus about the legality of divorce, but Jesus' concern is for how people treat one another, whether that results in legal estrangement or not.

Jesus expects more of humanity than the law did and does. Ancient law only considered adultery to be an offense against men: either a woman's husband or her father were the victims—the husband, because it called the paternity of his children into question or the father because it would be harder for him to marry her off. So it was unexpected for Jesus to say that a man commits adultery *against his wife* if he divorces her to marry someone else—that the offense was not just a violation of God's law but that the woman was also an injured party. The disciples would also have been surprised to hear Jesus suggest that a woman could divorce her husband for the same reason and then be regarded in the same way. Jesus speaks about men and women as if they are both fully human, which is really what the Genesis story was getting at, even if that point had been—and frequently still is—lost along the way.

Men, women, the children who try to get to Jesus but whom the disciples try to keep away: Jesus sees the image of God fully reflected in all of them. God suffers with us when others fail to cherish us as precious companions in this life we share. And God calls *us* not to do the things that separate us from others, for their sakes and for ours. Jesus wants us to be so much better to each other than we sometimes are; thank God, as always, grace abounds.