

Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test [Jesus] 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." 13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14 But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." 16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Mark 10:2-16, 2015

This passage certainly leaves some elephants standing in the room.

These are elephants that cannot be ignored, but as we address them we must always ask,

“Is this the central point of this reading?”

The two elephants are the reality that there are many who have been divorced and who may wonder if there is a place for them in the community of faith,

and wonder about their status before God.

The second is that in our society and culture the understanding of marriage has evolved significantly and now serves as a point of tension in our society, communities and churches.

When I have spoken with people throughout this week about this gospel lesson the responses I have gotten have been interesting.

Some may see one of these elephants and not the other, while some are acutely sensitive to both,

and that is likely going to depend on each persons life experience and/or understanding of the bible related to these matters.

Those whose lives have been touched by divorce in some way may hear this passage in an intensely personal way.

We must acknowledge that marriage as an institution is in pretty much of a shambles right now as young people are cohabitating outside marriage more and more, finding less value in this.

Marriage doesn't have the standing it once did as a form of relationship that gives strength to live up to the promises made.

Divorce is typically the culmination of, or the end result of a great deal of pain suffered through a marriage that wasn't working for some reason, and the reasons are many.

At the same time divorce can be the decision that saves lives of men, women and certainly the children of troubled marriages.

Some of you are old enough, as I am, to remember the days when divorce, even in the church was unforgivable, and there was a stigma attached to anyone who may have divorced.

But you in our community of faith know God forgives all our failures and shortcomings, even divorce

The other elephant in the room is the understanding of marriage that has evolved over the last 25 years of discussion about "Human Sexuality" within our own church,

and a movement that has taken place in our society to expand the definition of marriage to include same gender relationships.

The passages for this weekend speak of marriage as being between a man and a woman and these passages are central to the argument going on between the traditional definition and the expanded understanding of marriage between people of the same gender.

The tension that exists in society and even in our own community will go on for years. The key for us in this community of faith at this point is to learn what it is God is doing in the midst of all this, and continue to live together and carry out our ministry with love and respect for one another regardless of where our friends stand on the issue.

I believe that is what is central and most powerful in this gospel lesson.

Lets take a look at our gospel lesson.

In the very first verse we are told what this encounter is all about.

Some Pharisees came, and to test [Jesus] him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

...to test Jesus

this is not a casual, or even intense conversation about love, marriage and divorce.

It is a test!

And, moreover, it is not a test about divorce, but about the law.

Now this is not the first time Jesus has been challenged about the law.

In Chapter 2 Jesus is challenged by the people who asked,

"Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

And then the Pharisees challenged Jesus because he and his disciples picked grain as they walked through the field and ate it.

“Look, why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

In chapter 7 the Pharisees challenged Jesus on eating without washing hands in accordance with the traditions of the elders.

And with this test in our Gospel lesson today Jesus does what he does so often in these situations; He changes the subject.

Jesus affirms that yes, Moses gave this law,

but this one like all the rest serve the purpose of protecting the vulnerable, and those without power.

When a woman was divorced in Jesus’ day she lost everything;

status, reputation, economic security, everything, so this is no small matter.

Jesus affirms that yes, God’s creation in humanity is broken and a new law becomes necessary to care for those who are marginalized, hurt and cast aside.

This law is more than a convenience for a man who wants to get rid of his wife,

and not a simple matter to be used as a test of Jesus’ faithfulness to the creator’s will and purpose for humanity.

You are a broken people, BUT!

And this is where Jesus gets to the matter at hand—

What does the kingdom of God look like?

It looks like law and gospel.

The Pharisees were concerned about the law that they believed should shape lives and community.

Jesus is concerned with the Kingdom, the gospel, the good news and how those shape lives and community.

Jesus is concerned about those who have no power or status in community, those who have been used, abused, hurt and marginalized,

those who are easy prey for those with power and status,
those who fall prey to the power of evil, temptation,
sin and illness.

And these include the wealthy.

These members of the community are represented by the children in the last part of this passage.

"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."
16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

This is what the kingdom of God is about.

This is what the church was originally, is now and should always be about –

a place for all those who had been broken by life or rejected by the powerful

and who came to experience God through the crucified Jesus as the One who met them precisely in their vulnerability,

not to make them impervious to harm

but rather open to the brokenness and need of those around them.

But, goodness, is that hard to remember! No wonder Paul had to remind the Corinthians,

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God (I Cor. 1:26-29).

Part of being human is to be insecure, to be aware of your need, and in light of the cultural preference for strength, power, and independence, to be embarrassed by your need.

For this reason, Paul, following Jesus example, reminds us that to be broken isn't something to be ashamed of.

Rather, to be broken is, in fact, to be human.

And to be human is to be loved by God and drawn together into relationship with all the others whom God loves.

Which means that our gatherings on Saturdays and Sundays are local gatherings of the broken and loved,

of those who are hurting but also healing, of those who are lost but have also been found,

of those that know their need and seek not simply to have those needs met,

but having realized that in helping meet the needs of others their own needs are met in turn.

When you look at this passage not so much as instructions about divorce,

but instead as an invitation to see your life and your community as a place where God's work to heal and restore the whole creation is ongoing,

not by taking away all your problems but surrounding you with compassionate people who understand and care, who pray for you and love you,

and help you to discover your potential to reach out to others in love and compassion,

you see the Kingdom of God

We are a community of the broken, but we are the broken whom God loves and is healing and, indeed, using to make all things new.

Contrary to conventional wisdom about strength and security

This community made up of you who know yourselves to be broken and wonder if there is a place for you here,

and also those who live in denial, seeking relentlessly to make it on your own, even if it kills you,

is a community of the broken and blessed.

In God's kingdom, in this community, together you discover God's life-giving grace, love, and mercy.