

**Scripture: Mark 10:2-16**

<sup>2</sup>Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" <sup>3</sup>He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" <sup>4</sup>They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." <sup>5</sup>But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. <sup>6</sup>But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' <sup>7</sup>'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, <sup>8</sup>and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. <sup>9</sup>Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

<sup>10</sup>Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. <sup>11</sup>He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; <sup>12</sup>and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

<sup>13</sup>People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." <sup>16</sup>And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

**Proclamation of the Word**

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David Howell writes,

*She didn't look like a Pharisee. She appeared harmless: a flowered-print dress, short in stature, glasses too large for her rounded face. I thought she was going to welcome me to church. It was the reception to my very first pastorate. I extended my hand as she approached, opened my mouth- but before I could say anything, she said, "Preacher, do divorced people go to hell?"*

*Almost dropping my fruit punch, I thought "I just passed my ordination exam. What is this? Another test of some sort?"*

*I raced through my mind's data bank for something I had learned in pastoral care, or even New Testament courses, that I might offer her (and get myself off the spot.)*

*Finally, I spoke, "Better people than me get divorced."*

At first glance, this passage brings up all our anxieties and questions about divorce. But there is so much more going on in this text.

When the Pharisees confront Jesus, did you catch it? The Pharisees came to test him and asked Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" The short answer is YES! According to Moses in Deuteronomy 24 it is. Jesus could have answered yes and moved on.

I do not believe the Pharisees were testing Jesus' Bible knowledge. They were testing his authority. This passage is less about adultery and divorce than a test. So what is Jesus doing?

He accepts the challenge. Instead of quoting the law, he talks about the quality of faithful, loving relationships. You see Jesus is most concerned about telling us of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God than upholding the law. Jesus goes against Deuteronomy 24 and discusses how we treat one another. He takes the intention of marriage way further than the Pharisees do.

They are asking what is permitted. Jesus talks about what is ethical.

They are asking what is required. Jesus talks of purity of heart, intention.

They discuss divorce as a transaction. Jesus talks about relationship and people.

Jesus is always most concerned about people, vulnerable people, in particular.

Women had no means, nor rights. Notice that women could not divorce husbands, only men could divorce wives. The controversy that Jesus is drawn into was a common problem in his day lest we think we are the first to struggle with controversial issues. People of faith debated whether a man could divorce his wife for burning dinner or did it need to be a much bigger reason like adultery.

But Jesus stands up for women in this passage. Women were property of their husbands and if divorced, may have to turn to begging or prostitution to survive. And here is the connection to Jesus welcoming little children. Women and children were the vulnerable ones in this all male conversation. Jesus is most concerned for **protecting and caring for people above laws.** When people started bringing their kids to Jesus for a blessing, the disciples spoke sternly to those "bothering" Jesus. So Jesus takes a child and blesses him, he says,

"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. <sup>15</sup> Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." (Mark 9:14-15)

To receive the kingdom is to see people in the way Jesus sees them. Jesus points out the Pharisees' hardness of heart, but calls us to purity of heart when it comes to the care of relationships. Just as Jesus speaks of the protection of women from divorce, Jesus speaks sternly to the disciples for their lack of concern for children.

When we see people through the eyes of Jesus, it changes how we treat them. The contemporary church has handled divorce in such a way to care for the persons involved more than a legalistic, you

"may never divorce" attitude. The intention of marriage, for those called to this form of discipleship, is loving, faithful, mutually respectful relationships. But there are situations where the well-being of the persons involved leads to brokenness and divorce. Jesus is not forging a new legalist understanding of divorce, he is calling us to a high quality of care in our relationships. Jesus reminds us that the covenant of marriage is more important than just a contract on paper. To divorce in Jesus' day, a man would just tear up the contract. Jesus holds the covenant of marriage to a higher standard because it is one way we know and experience the faithful, covenantal love of God. In a throw-away society and a you-meet-my-needs world, covenants and commitments are easily tossed out the window. But as persons made in the image of God, our relationships are meant to be a reflection of how God cares for people.

The two parties are united, joined by God for the well-being of their family, yes, but also for the well-being of the community.

David Lose writes, "Jesus isn't speaking to individuals, you see, he's making a statement about the kind of community we will be. In fact, he's inviting us to imagine communities centered in and on real relationships; relationships, that is, founded on love and mutual dependence, fostered by respect and dignity, and pursued for the sake of the health of the community and the protection of the vulnerable."<sup>i</sup>

Again, the test on divorce is sandwiched between two conversations about the kingdom of God and children. In Mark 9 when the disciples are arguing over who is the greatest, Jesus places a child before them and reminds them that to be great is to serve. Our relationships with our community is one that cares for the least of these and bends down to welcome a child and to protect and defend the vulnerable in our community.

Our challenge today is how to care for one another and especially the vulnerable in our contemporary time. As people of faith we must wrestle with how we treat the least, the lost, the left out, and the littlest in Jesus' name. A measure of faithfulness is how we treat persons who are mentally ill, the refugee, the hungry, the poor, the elderly, disabled, the migrant, the child. This is the really difficult test, is it not? The question for us is what kind of community we will be?

In a week when in our own State a police officer was shot in a Columbia mall and another college campus mass shooting in Oregon, we must struggle with how to protect our neighbors and one another from such violence. According to a PBS article, we average one mass shooting a day in the U.S. PBS news reports, "In 2015 alone, there have been 294 shootings that killed or injured 1,464 people, according to Mass Shooting Tracker data, which counts at least four people wounded by gunfire as a mass shooting."<sup>ii</sup> Mass Shootings have increased as a form of violence. That is a national health crisis, an epidemic. Let's not have hard hearts like the Pharisees on this matter.

My friend, Mike Johnston, a Presbyterian Pastor, is a Chaplain at AnMed Hospital. After seeing families devastated and medical personnel try to save life after life, he considers this a health crisis. He says

that he is so tired of us just praying for victims of violence. We need to do something to protect each other. Rather than to have the same arguments, some people who follow Jesus feel led to work on the mental health system, which is struggling in our state. Others who follow Jesus feel called to strengthen families and communities through education. Teachers sadly have to consider safety plans for classrooms and teach gun safety to their children since many live in unsafe homes. Others who follow Jesus work to bring jobs to their communities. Others of us are called to work on common sense gun laws in a time where "well regulated militias" no longer exist (although the National Guard is our modern militia). We certainly can pray for victims and perpetrators, but action must follow for change to occur. Jesus was always concerned with the well being and protection of people.

Jesus is set up with a trick question. He more than accepts the challenge, he over accepts it. Today's passage is Jesus' over-acceptance speech.

Christian ethicist Samuel Wells<sup>iii</sup> reminds us that God always over accepts, goes over and above for God's people. God could have stayed removed and uninvolved, but instead chose to enter the world through the womb of a common, peasant girl. He comes to his people as a Jew and accepts death, even death on a cross. In death and resurrection God goes to great lengths, even to the point of being executed rather than return violence for violence. God over accepts death, and goes beyond death to resurrection.

God in Jesus Christ comes to us over and over again in self-giving love. By God's grace Jesus sets a table before us and welcomes us, all of us. Jesus over accepts even us. As someone tweeted this week, "You are incredibly loved. Now live like it." I would add "They are incredibly loved, too, all God's children." Do not just accept the gift of God's grace, over accept it. Then we can work to break down barriers and build unity and peace.

This table is wide and wraps around the whole world. We sit at this table with our global family today. Jesus welcomes and desires all of His children to be gathered. In fact, we pray for the day when "all God's children gonna sit together"<sup>iv</sup> at that great welcome table one of the days. May God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

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<sup>i</sup> David Lose, "Pentecost 19B: Communities of the Broken and Blessed," posted September 28, 2015 at davidlose.net

<sup>ii</sup> Hickey and Santhanam, "More than one mass shooting happens per day in the U.S., data shows", October 2, 2015 at pbs.org.

<sup>iii</sup> Jill Duffield, "Looking at the Lectionary; 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time," *Presbyterian Outlook* who quotes Samuel Wells, Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics, writes "*the story narrated by the Gospel writers is one long story of overaccepting. In the annunciation and the nativity, God overaccepts human life. He does not reject his people, nor does he simply accept them: instead he comes among them as a Jew...Jesus does not avoid*

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*the cross, nor is the cross the end of the story. In the resurrection, God shows that even the worst offer, the execution of the Son of God, can be overaccepted - even death and all its causes can become part of the story.*

<sup>iv</sup> Spiritual Song "I'm Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table" See Hymn #770 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press) 2013