

“Getting the Point Jesus Intends”

Mark 10:2-16

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As many of you know, my parents divorced when I was eight months old. This experience was not traumatic for me, I was too young to remember it. I was cared for well by my mother, with whom I lived, and my extended family, and my mother remarried when I was six. But still divorce shaped my life in many ways, not the least of which was that it kept me out of church until I was fifteen.

My mother left the church for two reasons – its opposition to racial integration and its judgment of her for divorce. She did not give up completely on Jesus, she just didn’t think the church was following him, though at the end of her too-short life she started to reconsider.

Sadly, it’s a story that communicates to many in the general sense of the church being too judgmental and on the specific issue of divorce. In far too many churches, it has been deemed to be not only a sin but one worse than most others and thus the cause for ridicule and exclusion from leadership roles. Unfortunately it is linked to the words of Jesus.

In our reading today from Mark 10, some Pharisees ask Jesus if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. He asks what Moses commands and they say he allows a man to write a certificate of divorce for his wife (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Jesus says it was only because of the people’s hardness of heart that this was done, and then he references the Genesis 2 text we have read and insists that this is the ideal - what God has joined together is not to be separated.

As if this is not enough, he tells the disciples in private, when they ask him to say more, thus proving the old adage about being careful what you ask for, that whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.

It sounds like a closed case. There is to be no divorce, no exceptions, Jesus has spoken! But it seems so unlike him. This is like

the story in which Jesus at first refuses to heal a woman's daughter just because she is an outsider (Mark 7:24-30) or last week's reading where he talks about cutting off hands and feet that offend us (Mark 9:43-46). Jesus said and did these things? Surely not! Can we edit them out of the canon, at least our functional canon, and just not read them anymore?

Well, that is one option, I suppose, but a better one is to try to figure out what Jesus is really saying in the context presented and see if this helps or changes anything. In this case, it does. We're not talking about explaining away or watering down the text. We're talking about getting the point Jesus intends.

The place to begin is with an understanding of how divorce works in Jesus' time. There are ancient teachings about marriage and divorce, but they do not render a clear word on the matter. In Jesus' time, only a man can divorce a woman. Though there may be rare exceptions, generally speaking it doesn't work the other way, hence the phrasing of the question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" That Jesus refers to a woman divorcing her husband is confusing, though this may be part of his attempt to make men and women equally responsible.

But in general, only a man can divorce his wife. The only question is as to what counts as a valid reason to do so. Rabbi Shammai says only unchastity, unfaithfulness, is cause, while Rabbi Hillel says any indecency will do, even cooking a meal that displeases him (I am not making this up!). The Essenes maintain that only if a man's first wife dies can he remarry. But all of this is about a man divorcing his wife.

Some teachings in the Mishnah even maintain that a man should only be punished for adultery if it is with another Israelite. So, stepping out with a foreign woman is "O.K." And adultery is an offense against the property rights of the other man, the woman being his property. Similarly, in Roman law it is "O.K." for a married man to sleep with an unmarried woman, but certainly not "O.K." for a married woman to sleep with an unmarried man. All of this is say - the playing field in marriage is not level. Women and men are not equal partners.

Heard in this context, Jesus' words take on an entirely different meaning. Rather than rendering judgment on all who divorce, he may be

trying to protect the vulnerable parties in this process, that is to say, women. The fact that he refers to a man divorcing his wife as committing adultery against her is actually a step toward recognizing her equality as is his odd reference to a woman divorcing her husband.

Taken out of context, Jesus' words sound narrow and judgmental, but understood rightly they offer support to the vulnerable and marginalized, which is, of course, in keeping with his entire ministry of reaching out to lepers and prostitutes, Gentiles and sinners of all stripes, everyone on the margins of good and proper society.

It even fits with the latter part of our reading wherein Jesus welcomes children into his arms and blesses them. We think of this as a nice, little, warm and fuzzy story to use when we bless children, which is appropriate, but it misses the point of the story as understood in context. Children are not quite fully human in this time, they are not welcome in a rabbi's presence, not worthy of his time and energy, as the disciples' efforts to turn them away confirms, they too are vulnerable and marginalized. So, Jesus reaches out to them in love.

We might want Jesus to go further in offering a direct word of grace for those who have gone through the pain of divorce, but even Jesus must go about some change gradually. It's why he tells his disciples that the Spirit will come to guide them further into truth, to help them embrace things they aren't ready to hear (John 16:12-15). But even though he doesn't go as far as we might like, the point he is making here is not about judgment, at least not of all who go through divorce. It is a word of advocacy for the vulnerable and marginalized.

The message for us is not just that we should quit judging harshly those who go through divorce, something I hope and pray this church has understood for years, even if we have not extended grace consistently much less offered enough in the way of supportive ministries for families experiencing divorce. Clearly we still have work to do. But the message also includes a calling to do whatever we can in the way of ministry with and advocacy for all who are vulnerable and marginalized in our time. We are followers of Jesus, after all, and he does this not just in this story, but over and over again.

So, the question is – who is vulnerable and marginalized now? Sadly, women and children are still on this list, even in this nation. Whatever we make of the latest public debate around alleged assault, it is clear not just from the #MeToo movement, but from crime statistics, which we know underreport such crimes, that women are abused in frighteningly high numbers and the way the court systems often process complaints does not encourage justice.

In addition to this, according to a recent Pew Research Center report, the gender gap on pay has narrowed just a little bit in the past 15 years, but just a little bit as in 2017 women on average were paid 82% of what men were paid which means that a woman would have to work 47 extra days in a year to earn the same income for the same job.

And when it comes to children, just one statistic is jarring enough. According to the USDA, in 2015 13 million children in this country lived with food insecurity, 1 out of every 6 children was/is hungry in this land of prosperity. Are women and children still vulnerable and marginalized? We don't really have to ask. We simply have to identify ways of addressing their needs.

But there are others who are marginalized and vulnerable, in this land alone - those who have been incarcerated, those who struggle with addictions, those who have mental health challenges, LBGT people, immigrants and refugees – and globally the Romani people (pejoratively called Gypsies), the Rohingya people in Myanmar, Christians in places like Pakistan, Muslims in parts of India, Jews in far too many places still. And in many global contexts, the vulnerabilities that pertain to women and children in this country are multiplied exponentially.

Fortunately we have missions partners around the world through CBF to address these concerns, as well as the larger body of Christ, over two billion Christians around the world we claim as brothers and sisters on this World Communion Sunday, but this does not take away our personal responsibility. If we are serious about following Jesus, and we understand that this includes reaching out to the vulnerable and marginalized, we will be involved in some way.

The good news is there is plenty of work to do. It is a matter of choosing when and where and how and who. Some efforts may be

straightforward acts of care, such as feeding the hungry as we will do this afternoon with the Rise Against Hunger event and the Crop Hunger Walk in a few weeks as well as ongoing efforts like Backpack Buddies and many others. But some efforts will involve more in the way of development, empowerment and advocacy.

The latter makes some of us uncomfortable, I know. Aren't we supposed to stay out of politics? In the partisan sense, yes, but this does mean ignoring issues of public concern, especially when our engagement addresses the needs of the vulnerable. Jesus didn't get into arguing about who would be the next Roman governor in his region or even who should be High Priest. He did address every issue of public concern openly and directly, even when doing so got him in trouble.

In fact, today's story may have a political edge. Why do the Pharisees ask Jesus for his opinion on divorce? Is it to draw him into the rabbinic debate which isn't really that volatile or is it to entice him to comment in a way that may draw attention from Roman officials? What got John the Baptist killed? It wasn't his preaching on repentance. It was his views on marriage and divorce. He criticized Herod for marrying his brother's wife.

Marriage and divorce were not just personal and religious concerns, they were social and political issues in this time, as they are in ours. As a matter of fact, every political issue is a personal issue at some level. We can try to stay out of things and assume we have taken some high moral ground, washed our hands like Pilate. But when we do, we are more like Pilate than Jesus.

So, let's set aside any faint remnants of unnecessary judgment on divorced people, but let's not be deceived into thinking we have gone far enough when we do. The world is full of wounded, vulnerable people crying out for compassion. And we have so much to offer them. It has been said that one of the most critical measures of a society is in how well it cares for the weak and vulnerable. I tend to think that is true. But there can be no question that one of the most central measures of a church is in how well we care for the weak and vulnerable. This is the point Jesus wants us to get. Do we get it?