

“What Kind of Community Do We Want to Be?”

Mark 10:2–16

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Presbyterian pastor David B. Howell describes an experience he had early on in his ministry in which a woman took Jesus’ words about divorce in today’s reading from Mark very seriously. He says she didn’t look like a Pharisee. She wore a flower-print dress, was short in stature, and had glasses too large for her rounded face. She looked harmless, but when he first met her as he began his ministry at the church, the first words out of her mouth were, “Preacher, do divorced people go to hell?”

So much for taking time to get to know each other. He was caught off-guard, he had just passed his ordination exam and thought he was done with being cross examined. So, he took a moment to consider an answer but finally said, “Better people than me get divorced.” As we might imagine, this answer was inadequate. The woman asked the question again, he gave the same answer, and over time he came to realize she was serious, and she was not looking for a way out. Her son was divorced, getting remarried, and thus in her mind, endangering his very soul (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, pp. 141-2)!

If anyone thinks this is an isolated story, I can assure you from my own experience it is not. As some of you know, I did not grow up in the church because my mother left it for two reasons — its opposition to integration and its harsh judgment of her for having had a divorce. I was allowed to go to church when I was fifteen. I went partly out of a genuine interest in spiritual things and partly as a means of rebellion. But over time, I have come to realize how right my mother was on both matters — integration and divorce — and how wrong the church was.

In regard to divorce, this rigid, judgmental view is linked to a superficial reading of a few words of Jesus. So, it has some basis in scripture, though there are different perspectives on how to read this text wherein the Pharisees ask Jesus if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife, and Jesus seems to say — yes, it is lawful, but only as an

accommodation to sin. We'll come back to what Jesus is saying. But underneath this specific issue, there is a more basic question, one of the most critical questions for the church today. What kind of community do we want to be? Perhaps better put, what kind of community do we discern God calling us to be?

One possibility is to be rules- and judgment-oriented, to allow little room for grace, whether the “sin” is divorce, being in love with the “wrong” person, or just believing the “wrong” things or having the “wrong” views. In this kind of community, questions and doubts are out of bounds. People who suffer are encouraged to be quiet or blamed for their suffering. This is referred to as “shooting the wounded” which sounds like hyperbole but is exactly what some churches do.

But another possibility is to be a community shaped by grace, one that welcomes everyone, extends hospitality to all, and thus embraces the second half of our reading from Mark wherein Jesus extends hospitality to children, which may seem like a no-brainer to us but is not in the first century, we will get to that too. In this kind of community, questions and doubts are welcomed, those who suffer are comforted, and judgment is suspended without losing all accountability.

We can debate all sorts of minutia, but the big picture question remains — what kind of community do we want to be? We all have a voice in addressing this question, but I want a community where people like my mother are welcomed and embraced in their wounded experience. I want a community where people like my sister who has had a female partner for thirty years is loved and made to feel at home. I want a community where people with different perspectives embrace each other, where those with different abilities are welcomed, where those with mental health challenges feel safe. And I want a community where people of different ethnicities and nationalities belong.

On World Communion Sunday, the day we celebrate the oneness of Church throughout the world, this latter desire seems critical right now. There has been a great deal of vitriolic rhetoric in recent weeks directed at immigrants. Lies have been told, fear has been used to manipulate people, and lives have been put in danger. This is taking place in the political realm, and we try to avoid to any engagement with

the partisan aspect of politics, but these are children of God we are talking about, many of them sisters and brothers in Christ! We cannot in good conscience remain silent. We have members or regular visitors in this church from Japan, Germany, Columbia, Ghana, Ecuador, China, Nigeria, Albania, France, Belgium, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Russia, Ukraine, Iran, Iraq, Honduras, and Haiti...

I want a community where all God's children are welcome, I think you want this kind of community, and scripture tells us God does – a community of grace and acceptance, not rules and judgment; a community of openness and love, not division and fear.

There is still such a thing as right and wrong, but if we are going to seek to follow God's teachings, however imperfectly, in the context of grace, which ones are we going to prioritize? There are a lot of teachings. We may point to the Ten Commandments, but we need to include all of them, including the one about not bearing false witness against our neighbor. We might also consider the teachings that seem most central like loving our neighbor and welcoming the stranger, forgiving those who hurt us and helping the poor and oppressed.

There is still such a thing as right and wrong, but there are many teachings and principles to consider, and with each, there is some complexity. For example, what is Jesus really saying about divorce? In our text, he is asked a very specific question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" And he is asked this in a very specific time and place, First Century Occupied Israel. After he says it is legal but only as an accommodation to the people's hardness of heart, he goes on to speak a more general word of condemnation of divorce as a whole, and this is all we have from Jesus on this subject, but context matters.

For the most part, men can divorce their wives, but wives cannot divorce their husbands, even though Jesus speaks as if they can. Men sometimes divorce their wives simply because someone better looking comes along or they find a better cook or someone who disagrees with them less... but often for no justifiable reason. And when a woman is divorced, she loses most of her rights, including the right to own property. She could easily find herself on the street having to beg, or worse, prostitute herself.

Heard in this context, the question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” takes on a different meaning, as does Jesus’ response. He doesn’t want women to be abused by the legal system, and it is difficult to image Jesus wanting to add to the pain of a failed marriage. He forgives a woman caught in the act of adultery... who obviously had a partner in this act who doesn’t seem to be held accountable...

Taking all of this into account, it seems unwise to maintain a rigid stance on divorce or more generally to shape a community based on rules and judgment. Some may think of this as explaining away the text and ignoring Jesus’ teaching. In fact, it is doing to work of understanding the text and trying to discern the heart of Jesus for our time. On any matter we consider, if grace isn’t involved, it’s difficult to see where Jesus fits in, the same Jesus who dies and is raised to extend grace to us all. Jesus always seems to extend grace and hospitality to the very people others judge and exclude.

The latter part of our reading from Mark illustrates this reality, even though this is not obvious to us. Jesus welcomes children into his arms, blesses them, and says that whoever does not receive the realm of God like a child will never enter it. We see this as normal. Of course, children are welcome, they are precious, they are valued by God and us.

But in Jesus’ time, children are viewed in a different way, as a nuisance, as not worthy of a rabbi’s attention, which is why the disciples speak sternly to the people bringing children to Jesus. They should know better! But Jesus, who is always thinking for himself, rebukes his disciples and welcomes the children. This fits with everything we know about him. He is the grand host, one who extends hospitality to women and children, tax collectors and prostitutes, lepers and Gentiles. He envisions a community shaped by grace where all are welcome.

In the end, this is the kind of community we want. In many ways, it is the kind of community we already have. We are a diverse group of people, each with our distinct virtues and shortcomings, and we seek to welcome everyone who comes, no matter what mixture of qualities they bring. We are crowned with glory and honor, as the psalmist says, every one of us, but we are also desperately in need of grace. The good news is we have it in abundance, and we are called to share it with others.