

Dealing with Divorce

This morning's Gospel lesson finds us back with Jesus and 12 on the way to the climax of Jesus ministry in Jerusalem. He has left the Gentiles behind; he has left the Galilee behind; he has left the thrill seekers and the miracle chasers behind. Where we take up the story, Jesus has made his way south to Judea. And there, a new group of crowds for Jesus to teach along with an old group of enemies for Jesus to confound.

Background

Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife or not? What a strange question, recorded as it is in the Gospel of Mark without much of a context. But Mark leaves clues for readers who know how and where to look to help frame the question and help us make sense of it.

First of all, notice that Jesus has journeyed south from Galilee to Judea. This is not just a geographical note. Jesus has moved from Philip to Antipas. Are there lights going on yet? Do you remember a few weeks back when we reflected on the murder of John the Baptist? Do you remember why? Antipas divorced his wife in order to take his brother, Philip's wife, Herodias (who also happened to be his half niece). John, we read kept on preaching about it. Outside of prison and later inside, his message to Antipas was, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife!" Jesus, further, was close to John. The last time he passed through the region, Antipas wondered whether John had been raised from the dead in order to torment him again.

Second, notice also that Jesus is moving from the margins to the center. Jesus is beginning to move again among the religious elite. Not the hick Pharisees from the countryside, but the powerful ones who set the agenda. And for these people, divorce was a live issue. Moses, as we'll see in a minute, could be said to be ambiguous on the matter so, the rabbis took it upon themselves to figure out the circumstances in which divorce (and it was always a man who divorces his wife; not the other way round) was lawful. Rabbi Hillel, writing about two or three decades before Jesus, offered lots of reasons to justify a divorce. Did your wife spin too quickly in the street so that other men could see her ankles? Divorce. Did she talk back to your mother? Divorce. Was she too loud? Divorce. Was she a bad cook? Divorce. For Rabbi Hillel, just about any reason would do and his view was the view that seemed to prevail among the religious leaders of Jesus's day.

So, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife or not?" is a loaded question and the Pharisees of Judea bring it to Jesus.

The Dilemma

Dr. Phil has many famous sayings. One of them goes something like this: "Ninety percent of questions are statements in disguise." This question certainly is not a question. It is a dilemma. Jesus has to make a choice, neither of which has happy results.

One horn of the dilemma is the preaching of John the Baptist. John was a divorce hardliner. "It is not lawful for you to have your husband's wife!" That conviction cost John his head. But here's the thing: the people, the rednecks from the Galilee and the common folk in Judea thought John was a prophet. And when John pronounced against the one whom Jesus called "that old fox," they cheered. Jesus came preaching like John. SO much so that when Antipas first heard of Jesus, he

thought he was John raised from the dead. If Jesus says, “Yes! It is unlawful for a man to divorce his wife,” Jesus will stay in step with the preaching of John and he will keep the everyday and marginal people on his side. And, he’ll lose the religious elite and he may well lose his head.

The other horn of the dilemma is this odd marriage of the cultural elites under Herod Antipas and the Religious elites represented by this group of Pharisees. As you know these guys hated each other. The Herodians thought the Pharisees were self-righteous and risked the wrath of Rome as a result. The Pharisees thought the Herodians were corrupt and cared not a whit about God’s law. BUT, they both hated Jesus and loved easy divorce. If Jesus said “Yes, it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife,” it would be politically smart—effectively disarming both sets of enemies. But he would lose his following who thought he was continuing in the tradition of John.

So which horn of the dilemma will Jesus fall on? Will he risk his life, or risk his following?

Jesus’s Answer

Jesus, as he always done, chooses neither horn. Instead, he directs his questioners straight to Moses. What does Moses say? What a deft move! Instead of debating with the Rabbis, Jesus goes straight to the source. Tell me what Moses says. Let’s go straight to Scripture.

Their reply was disingenuous. “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce.” Moses, in fact, did not say that. God said, through Moses, You shall not commit adultery—the sixth commandment. And the penalty for adultery, for both partners, was death. God said through Moses, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife,” part of the tenth commandment. If these commandments are obeyed, there will be very little occasion for divorce. Indeed, God will later say through the prophet Malachi, “I hate divorce.” And, in Deuteronomy 24, Moses also says, “If a man divorces his wife for indecency, he cannot take her back again under any circumstance.”

Hillel went to work on that word translated indecency. And when he was done, being a back cook was indecency enough. What Jesus wants his critics to notice (and they already know, but don’t want to admit it) is that John the Baptist is far closer to Moses than Hillel and certainly Antipas. Moses in Deuteronomy 24 gives *no* command to divorce under certain circumstances. There is not even a permission to divorce in those verses. Moses, it appears, sadly acknowledges that God’s desire for marriage will be abrogated. Divorce will, whether God or Moses like it or not, take place. And in that event, the least we can do is avoid serial monogamy and the victimization of women. This is why Jesus said, “Moses gave you this commandment (which is not really a command at all) because you are so hardhearted.”

I think we can summarize the opening of Jesus’s response like this: “Pharisees, forget Hillel. Moses doesn’t give you what you want him to! You have put your traditions ahead of God’s Word. You hypocrites.” Jesus then goes to Genesis chapter 2, *also* traditionally regarded as from the pen of Moses, and gives his description of marriage. You want to talk about Moses? Let’s talk all of Moses.

He begins with these words, “from the beginning God made them male and female.” Singular. It is a direct reference to the man and the woman in the Garden. Two alone. **Marriage is exclusive.** It is not expansive. There were not more for either Adam or his wife to choose from. Each was for the other. Then Jesus continues. A man will leave a father and mother and cleave to his wife. The word translated cleave there means to hold fast, to cling to, even to be glued together. **Marriage**

is indissoluble. It is not the revolving door that some want it to be. Genesis, for example, would be no fan of Richard Burton and Liz Taylor who, when divorced wanted nothing except to be together and when together, wanted nothing except to be divorced. But back to Jesus “and the two shall become one flesh.” **Marriage is unitive.** Marriage breaks an old entity to make a new one. It makes a new single unit. A family. The two become one flesh, says Jesus, giving us the context in which the sexual act and its purpose—the production of children—make sense. And finally, Jesus says, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” **Marriage is Divine.** It is God who does the joining. And if God has done the joining, it cannot be undone easily. Indeed, to presume so to do is the deepest human arrogance.

Jesus sticks with Moses, knowing his critics can’t argue with him because to do so will make them incoherent. They revere Moses, too. In so doing, he vindicates John and tweaks Antipas again. Jesus ends up siding with John, but in a way that puts John and him on the side of Moses.

What does this have to do with us?

If I have stepped on toes this morning, it has not been my intention. I have intended only to set out Jesus’s teaching on divorce clearly, as it is recorded in the Gospel of Mark. Would you press on with me? If you are caught short or even hurt by our Lord’s words, please don’t bolt. At least don’t bolt just yet. We need to ask just one more question. What does Jesus’s teaching on divorce have to do with us?

First, it seems to me, it underscores the universality of human sin. The sin here is not unique to divorced people. This passage indicts all of us, married and single, for it exposes the many, many ways in which we try to avoid and evade and disobey God’s commands while justifying ourselves. If **this** is what marriage is, or is to be, in the eyes of God, none measures up. And it is the height of human arrogance to suggest otherwise. Many marriages “make it.” We celebrated one such marriage just a couple of weeks back. But every marriage that makes it is a marriage that has faced tests and challenges. It has faced vows strained and sometimes broken. And it has survived only as a result of human repentance and forgiveness, and divine mercy and grace. I’ll have more to say about mercy and grace in a moment. Hang on.

Second it highlights the gravity of God’s judgment. The Pharisees were looking for loopholes in the law. Antipas didn’t care. Each did as they would. And God’s assessment, given not simply on a vague permission in Deuteronomy, but from the creation forward, and twice in the 10 commandments, was clear: “I hate divorce.” That’s pretty grim. We do not like to hear that God judges our sin. We would rather he would wink at our failings or even admire our creativity in finding loopholes. But God doesn’t. He says he hates it. As many marriages that make it, the statisticians tell us, there are almost as many that fail. What does this mean for them? Hang on.

Third, it lays open the wideness of God’s mercy. Here, we need to take a little detour. God’s married. Did you know that? Many of the gods and goddesses of the ancient world were married to each other. Zeus was married to Hera. It didn’t stop either of them from fooling around with others, whether divine or human. But there you go. Osiris and Isis were married in the Egyptian pantheon. The enslaved Israelites would have known that. Closer to Israel’s home, Ba’al was married to Asherah. This provoked some Israelites to ask a question—one recorded in the archeological record—Does YHWH have his Asherah? Does God have a wife?

He does! God at Sinai married his people. Israel is both God's son and God's wife. And every time Israel went after Ba'al or Asherah or Moloch or whomever; every time the people of Israel and Judah worshipped gods other than the God who rescued them from Egypt and made them the object of his special love, they committed spiritual adultery.

After centuries, God has enough and through the prophet Jeremiah, he says, "I divorce you!" And the proof of God giving up on his marriage is the pagan conquests of the promised land. Assyria first conquers the northern kingdom of Israel, and later, Babylon conquers the southern kingdom of Judah. The marriage is broken. God, it seems, is willing to divorce. But is he?

After the fall of Jerusalem, seventy years of exile pass. We read a little about those years in the books of Esther and Daniel. And then, God raises up a prophet named Hosea. And among the things he tells that poor prophet, "How can I forget you, Ephraim? How can I hand you over? I will not destroy you for I am God and not a man. I will not come in wrath." God forgives his wayward people. Having sued for divorce, he promises a new covenant, one that includes both Jews and Gentiles among that people that together is God's bride. God is not hard hearted like we are. God refuses to be divorced from his people. God's grace and mercy heals even those wounds.

And this is the God who invites us to his table this morning. He is a God who hates sin. He is a God who judges sin. He is a God who destroys sin. And does it by forgiving sinners for the sake of his dear Son. Jesus the Bridegroom who shares his holiness with us, his collective bride. And feeds us with his very self that he might one day present us to his father as a bride without spot or wrinkle. We may and do have to live with the consequences of our sin, and the sins of others. And sometimes, because of sin, marriages fail. But listen, there is no sin so great that God cannot forgive. No wound so grievous that God cannot heal. His compassion is aroused. He does not come in wrath. He comes to save.