

Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

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

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

"Marriage As Metaphor"

If you pray the Daily Office, the church's daily round of prayers and Scripture readings for which there is an assigned lectionary, you (like me) would have spent this week reading from Hosea. Written around 800 years before the birth of Christ, the first few chapters of this book use a marriage metaphor to make a point. Now, the specific language of this marriage metaphor is hard to read, but it's the theological point that's important. During a

deeply traumatic time in the history of his people, Hosea uses the marriage metaphor to depict God's covenant with ancient Israel. In the prophetic text, Hosea is railing against Israel, against his own community: furious at the idolatry he's surrounded by, he interprets the collective life of his community as an abandonment of God by God's own people, and he uses the intimacy of marriage to make his point.

Marriage was, for a long time, understood and experienced as the fundamental building block of society, so it makes sense that the prophet Hosea,¹ and also Isaiah,² Jeremiah,³ Malachi,⁴ and Ezekiel,⁵ they all use marriage as an evocative metaphor for God's relationship with the ancient Israelites.

Interpreting as best we can across the great divide of both time and cultural difference, we can assume marriage would have symbolized a binding together, mutual agreement; a sense of protection, of safety and stability, of lasting, mutual commitment to the ongoing life of all the members of the household. Marriage was, at the very least survival, economically and physically.

It's really important for us to be mindful of the fact that the meaning, the purpose, and the mechanics of marriage have changed dramatically since the 8th century before Christ *and* since Jesus' time.

¹ Hosea 1-3

² Isaiah 62:5

³ Jeremiah 3

⁴ Malachi 2

⁵ Ezekiel 16; 23

Then, marriage was rarely seen as a recognition of love between two people,⁶ it was rarely a religious or spiritual act in itself - instead it was the basic practice of creating a household, with family members and workers and property and assets, and this, especially in Jesus' time, the household, this was the fundamental unit of society. Life was hard, and could even be un-survivable outside of the household unit.

The marriage metaphor, as it's used by Hosea, goes so far as to evoke a judgement of **apostasy** – Hosea is apparently accusing his own community of having willingly abandoned or renounced their identity as God's chosen, of having abandoned or renounced their covenantal relationship with God. A desperately serious inference. Ancient Israel's covenant with God was its primary identity. Bound up in the Covenant are specific ethical demands and obligations, a mutuality with God and one another ... and it's the abandonment of all these that Hosea is pointing to with his marriage metaphor.

Adultery and divorce for the Biblical prophets are sharp ways of illustrating and illuminating the destructive impact of turning away from God, from one another, from the Covenant. These metaphors are a highly effective way, a visceral way, of speaking about *the choice* of stepping out of the primary and vital relationship that holds all of life together, the primary and vital relationship that gives all of life its shape, its meaning, and its ultimate purpose – and that's: relationship with God.

Our culture today understands marriage very differently, the church, today, understands marriage very differently. And so

⁶ Annotated New Testament 608-611

without careful exploration of the context in which our ancient sacred texts were written, Jesus' words in today's Gospel reading are ripe for misinterpretation and misapplication, especially if they're reduced, flattened to a single, literal understanding.

Jesus was steeped in all these ancient authoritative texts, and, because of the depth and complexity of our spirituality, because of the cultural context through which we must always make sense of our reality, Jesus' teachings warrant close and careful reading.

Jesus is being tested here about a technicality of the law, he engages with his inquisitors using words lifted from Scripture, signaling that his teachings and understandings are absolutely orthodox, absolutely in the bounds of Jewish law. But his ultimate point is the more profound, essential reminder to those who seem to have missed the point of it all, that, "what God has joined together, let no one separate." In continuity with the prophets whose texts Jesus would have studied and been fluent in, Jesus is also using the marriage metaphor to point to the Covenantal relationship of God with God's people.

Jesus is emphasizing that we were made to be in relationship, with one another, and with God – and, by pointing at and through the marriage metaphor, Jesus is emphasizing how destructive, damaging, and harmful, both to ourselves and for those with whom we share our lives, setting aside this primary truth is.

Jesus is not offering us here a commentary on marriage as we understand it today, or on gender roles or identity as we know them today. Jesus is pointing to the truth of relationship, how committed relationships with one another hold society together.

Folding in centuries of Biblical prophetic tradition, Jesus is evoking the strength of our unions with one another, the safety and protection this offers: that we leave our biological relationships, the ones we don't choose for those we enter into and commit to, and are held by, as adults.

We are meant to be together, in relationship, bonded, all of us, by the love we have for God and the bonds of love we have for one another. This is the big picture, this is 'the law' from which all other laws surely flow. To lose sight of this is to get tangled in dangerous distractions that risk, themselves, being a source of separation from that which is most important.

As we look at the world around us, so many parts of which are burning today, being bombed and bull-dozed today, we can surely see how quickly we forget the very Ground of our being. The technicalities of war, acts of "justifiable aggression" are argued as legitimate forms of defense, the legal right to use violence is argued as the only way to peace.

... and people are dying by the tens of thousands, and the suffering is incalculable, and the destruction will leave wounds and trauma deep in the heart of humanity and this planet, for generations to come.

Jesus says, "what God has joined together, let no one separate." We are joined together, as siblings in this life, we are joined together, with one another, and with God. That is our most basic truth.

The technicalities of how to make that work can be a life-giving force for good, to ensure survival, thriving even; but those technicalities, those legal frameworks, can also get detached

from their very reason for being. Our laws and societal frameworks should, surely, offer safety and protection, help us to create a just and fair society, continue to guide us toward fullness of life, all of us – because we are all in this together, we are all joined together. Our suffering and our lives cannot be neatly separated, we live in a single, continuous ecosystem, both physical and spiritual, and it's this that Jesus is pointing to.

Jesus came into the world not to condemn it and us, to judge, to punish, to inflict harm, to be yet another source of our suffering. Jesus came to save, by relentlessly affirming the role of love and relationship, by relentlessly bringing us back to God and to one another.

It's so easy to forget we are *all* beloved children of God, but today, and in the weeks ahead, especially as we head into our election season, this is what we *must all* remember.