

Mark 10 - divorce

As a pastor it is not uncommon for someone to come up to you and ask you a question about a sensitive or charged topic. At seminary, they teach you that one of the first things you need to know before answering is, “Why do you want to know?”

So someone comes up and asks about abortion. “Why do you want to know?” Is it because you think the child isn’t a child but a parasite and the church needs to lighten up? Or is it because you had one five years ago and you’ve been grieving it ever since? If it’s the first, then perhaps the answer would include some biology, some truth about what life is. If it’s the second, a grieving mother, then the answer would include a whole lot of forgiveness won on the cross and eternal life that is given even to the unborn. “Why do you want to know?” makes a difference.

But that is not the touchy topic of the day.

Today it is divorce. The pharisees come up to Jesus, the good Pastor, and ask him about this “gleeful” topic. Jesus and seemingly Mark don’t even need to ask them “Why do you want to know?” Because they already know, It is there in the text, they ask this “in order to test him.” To trick him. To ensnare him. Not exactly the purest motives.

You don’t get the sense that these pharisees are real torn up about the issue as if they are grieved by the divorces they’ve had. No, they are proud and don’t think they’ve done anything wrong, casting of wives and finding new ones.

And so Jesus will cut them down with the law today.

But here we are, with our families and pasts and we are the collateral damage, aren’t we?

Divorce is so public, everyone knows, our cheeks get red, we feel everyone is looking at us.

“Jesus did you have to say it, and say it this way?” And the answer is – when he is talking to the stubborn pharisees? Yes! He gave them the law and he gave it full force.

But, I am cheating now, but consider another text. The Woman at the well, who the Lord knows had been divorced five times and has been beaten down by painful relationships and abandonment and broken hearts time after time. And some of it is probably her fault, too. How does he “answer” her? “I will give you living water that will well up to eternal life.”

Pretty much the same topic, but a completely different tone, isn't it? Pharisees get law, she get's gospel. Why? Because one group is proud, the other humble and contrite. “Why do you want to know?”

And so if your cheeks are red and you think everyone is looking at you because you've had a divorce or been remarried, well, I want to address everyone else then, and ask, as Jesus did to another contrite woman broken down over these issues, and ask, “Who is without sin? Let them cast the first stone.”

Can we offer the forgiving grace of Jesus to those who are contrite? Can we all gather at the well of living water that Jesus offers because we all need it for our sin?

And hopefully now, with the context that Jesus is speaking harshly today because he is speaking to hardened, proud pharisees, not people broken by relationships and by their choices or not - Hopefully then we can actually take a look at what he says and maybe somehow learn from it.

And from it we learn that Jesus does have a definition of marriage, as much as the world would like to think he didn't say anything about it, not true. He has a definition and it is the same given in Genesis at God's creation and the creation of marriage and the family. It is one man and one woman coming together and forming one flesh.

Divorce then, undoes that. So how could we ever called it “blessed?” And in his answer we see God in the Old Testament didn’t *ble*ss it, he *per*mitted it because of our hardness of heart, our sin. Divorce is always, even in the most obvious cases of abuse or adultery, it is always the breaking of vows and a covenant promise til death. That’s not good. And now if the cheeks get red again, we might be thinking, “well I’ve had a divorce and I am well aware it isn’t fun or good, so why do we have to bring it up again?” Because the pharisees, like parts of the world we are in, are tempted to see it as no big deal and so our Lord reminds them that it is. And it’s OK for us to agree on that, we are on the same team.

Even as we acknowledge that sometimes in this broken world - sometimes we find ourselves in a place with no good options. And I am not saying that the ends sanctify the means, they don’t. But I am saying that constant pain and strife isn’t God’s will either and kids are involved, and so sometimes we have to choose between two bad options and the lesser of two evils. Are you proud about it like the pharisees? Then be warned. Or are you hurt by it? Then go to the well, and get some living water. “Why do you want to know?”

I’ll say it again: If your past is broken by your fault or not. Go to Jesus, confess the pain and anger and sorrow and hurt, and know he **isn’t** going to treat you like a pharisee, but like a woman at a well. Go to the living waters, confess that a promise was broken, and find full pardon in the One who has kept his promise to die and rise to forgive and wash you clean.

Now, we’re almost there. Bear with me. Because we need to address what, for many, is the most difficult part of this passage – the remarriage verses. We will once again remember the audience, “Why do you want to know, Pharisees? because you are trying to trap me and don’t give two rips about who’ve you hurt with your divorces and remarriages.” We will remember he is talking to *them* when he teaches about the One flesh union.

If in marriage two become one, as Jesus already said, then in divorce that promise is broken but that one flesh union is still, in a way, intact, UNTIL it is joined to another. And that simply, Jesus notes, was not God's design. And so it isn't good for the pharisees to be swapping wives around left and right. But then what do *we* do? Never remarry? For some, as Paul notes in Corinthians, that is a preferred option. For others... it's tough and a decision that should be given thought, it factors kids, burning with passion, the ability to keep up with the bills and on and on... not something to be considered lightly and in a way becomes another example of a lesser of two evils. "Do I join in a one flesh union with another and in that first act confess there is a brokenness? Or, if I honestly think I cannot faithfully remain single, well, will that just bring about more sin if I don't remarry?" Tough questions. Take them to the Lord. Seek wisdom in his word. It can be tough, like today's reading, but it's for your good.

What we can say is that for those who have joined in another one flesh union after remarrying, well, is this saying to break that off along with their new vows? No. They've already become one flesh, and why break another promise. I think this text would encourage us to honor the new marriage. To be faithful in that. And to see today as a new opportunity to live out God's design in a broken world the best you can in the relationships you have today.

And this applies to all: For the young kids and the single: that probably looks like showing some restraint with their flesh until they get married. For the divorced it looks like considering what options they have to be faithful in their callings in a broken world, and if they can pull that off single or not? For the remarried and married it looks like cherishing and being faithful to the vows and union you have right now.

And if this seems tedious, or silly like God needs to grow up, well, I don't think it is a coincidence Jesus goes from talking about Marriage to talking about children. He longs to bless

the children, and one of the ways he blesses them is with relationships that seek to be faithful. And yes, even when our relationships seem to be all about picking up the pieces, can we still seek to be faithful today? Yes. The sociology is clear on this, healthy relationships beget healthy relationships. Which may cause us to despair if our relationships aren't healthy, but perhaps it can inspire us to seek to be more faithful for the sake of others. And this is for you single folks out there too – how you are faithful in your relationships or lack thereof still impacts others. It is a witness. So let's seek to be faithful.

And what does that faithfulness look like? It looks like standing for the truth, as Jesus does before the pharisees. It looks like showing compassion and gospel, like he does for a woman at a well and a woman caught in adultery. Because, after all, our marriages, even the “best” of them, are only a reflection of God's love for his bride the Church.

His bride is adulterous, longing for things other than him, for money, for power, for pride, for distraction and constant entertainment and comfort. His bride is dirty, foul of mouth and eye. His bride complains, shouts, is prejudiced, and spiteful. And no this is not a joke, this is you. And yet, while he does not shirk the truth, to his bride, his people, he speaks tenderly. He promises pardon and unconditional love. He pays the price for her sin, your sin. He sacrifices himself for her good, your good. And even as we continue to sin, he loves nevertheless. He washes her clean, he, risen, promises to raise her up and to give to her an inheritance of everlasting life in his everlasting covenant that he is faithful to uphold.

Whatever your past, whatever your present, hear his Word, even if it hurts, especially if it hurts, and then find refuge in him. May we, unlike the pharisees, seek to know God's wisdom on the topic, even if it hurts a bit. And may it shape us, and may it bring us closer to him and his love poured out sacrificially on the cross that we might have the water of life that wells up to eternal

life where all is forgiven and healed. God is merciful, he has vowed his love to you, and he is faithful, he will see us safely there. Amen.