

Sermon

Proper 22B October 6, 2024

Mark 10:2-16

When quoting scripture, what is the most important thing to remember? Context is everything. I said this a few weeks ago and pointed to Matt. 18:8 (“If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away”) as an example. I also said, to borrow a phrase from Emily, you shouldn’t be playing Bible roulette. Context matters.

The context of a verse within a passage matters. The context of the passage within a chapter matters. The context of the chapter within the book matters. And the context of everything in life matters.

I bring up context again because today we are faced with one of the more difficult passages in the gospels – that being Jesus’ teaching and discussion on marriage and divorce. This is one of those passages I can hear someone, most likely a church leader, say, “The Bible *clearly* says divorce is a sin and should not be allowed.”

It’s hard for me to say that. I am a child of divorce. My sisters have each been divorced. I’ve had parishioners, friends, and colleagues who have been divorced. But the Bible clearly says . . . So as hard as this passage is, let’s spend some time looking at it.

Jesus is now beginning his journey to Jerusalem and his eventual crucifixion and death. Crowds once again gather around him and he begins to teach. During his teaching, some Pharisees show up to test him. That word, test, is the same word, by the way, that is used when Jesus is in the wilderness and tested/tempted by Satan. And as we have seen before, these confrontations are designed to bring dissention and allow for charges to be brought up against Jesus.

I won’t go into details, but there were two religious camps around the idea of divorce. On one side, the only valid reason for divorce was infidelity. On the other side, any fault a man found with his wife was grounds for divorce. The Pharisees threw Jesus into the middle of this argument in a game of “gotcha” hoping he would alienate at least half of his followers.

So Jesus is asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” His first response is legalistic: “What’s written in the law?” Going back to Deut. 24:1-4, the Pharisees say that Moses allowed for divorce.

But Jesus was never one to be legalistic. He says, “It was because of your hardness of heart that Moses wrote this.”

Hardness of heart. This is a phrase that comes up several times in scripture. Pharaoh’s heart was hardened when he refused to let the Israelites worship God, resulting in the Exodus. Hardness of heart is used to show the Israelites’ unwillingness to follow God completely. And Mark uses the phrase to show Jesus’ anger toward the religious leaders and their lack of compassion when Jesus heals a man’s withered hand on the Sabbath. When we are more concerned with ourselves or how people aren’t meeting our expectations, our hearts have been hardened.

In other words, divorce laws are necessary because we are obstinate, self-centered, stubborn, hurtful, or reflect any number of other behaviors not grounded in God. It is these human tendencies that lead to relational ruptures. Rather than get mired in the legalities of divorce, Jesus redirects the discussion from man’s legal issues and concerns to what the will of God actually is.

Laws for divorce are necessary because of our hardness of heart, which is in direct opposition to how God desires we live. There is no description of warm-heartedness in scripture, but something that comes close is Paul’s list of the gifts of the Spirit found in Galatians. These include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. By applying these gifts to our lives and our relationships, including marriage, we begin to live as God intended us to live. Relationships, all relationships – friendships, marriages, families, etc. – become life-giving, nurturing, and healthy when we operate as God intends.

Unfortunately we do not always reflect those gifts of the Spirit. We can become selfish, self-absorbed, and inwardly focused to the detriment of those around us. It’s important to evaluate the relationships we are in. Do we love others? Are we loved? Do we nurture the other person? Are we nurtured? Do we provide a safe place? Are we safe? Among other questions.

When it comes to weddings, and Joeline knows this, I only have one sermon. Some of the details change, but the overall sermon is this: What is 1 + 1? One plus one equals three. You, your spouse, and the marriage. You need to care for all three for it to work. You need to nurture all three for it to work. You need to love all three for it to work.

As I alluded to earlier, this passage has been used over the centuries to inflict great harm on people, primarily women. Can you imagine being in an abusive marriage

and have your priest tell you that you couldn't leave because Jesus said so? That's how women die.

But as I said earlier, context is everything.

Abusive relationships are sinful. Self-centered relationships are sinful. Manipulative relationships are sinful. And if we know one thing about Jesus, it's that he came to free us from the bondage of sin.

The ideal marriage is a life-long union between two people that nurtures, cares for, and strengthens those people who have entered into that covenant. This is the ideal of what God has brought together. It is that ideal that no one should separate, and it is that ideal to which Jesus appeals.

Divorce can happen for any number of reasons – abuse, infidelity, financial malfeasance, addiction, growing apart, and the ever-popular “irreconcilable differences.” Some of these reasons are more valid than others – I would never tell an abused spouse to try and work it out. But I'm convinced that all divorce is based on self-centered, selfish reasons. My needs aren't being met. I found someone else. They aren't being obedient to me. And the list goes on.

Even so, divorce, on some level, damages us. It terminates a union begun under the auspices of God's desire for us. It causes children to take sides. It can leave us with deep scars. It ruins friendships. The ripples caused by divorce spread far and wide. And this is what Jesus is getting at.

If we loved others as God loves us, if we loved others as we love ourselves, if we nurtured, cared for, and worked for the well-being of others **AND** the relationships we enter into, then we would be that much closer to living into God's ideal, and we would be that much closer to ending divorce.

May we all have our hard-hearted hearts warmed to the point where we value our relationships as much as we value ourselves.

Amen.