

### 03 October 2021: Mark 10:2-16 (Proper 22)

I once saw a sign that stated: “Love is blind, but marriage is a real eye-opener.” It seems a good way to begin. Jesus’ encounter with his opponents is centered on the issue of marriage, divorce, and re-marriage. There were very intense debates in Jesus’ time, and his opponents want to get him embroiled so that with any luck, from their perspective, his response will alienate at least half the crowd.

The Pharisees likely approached Jesus with Deuteronomy 24:1 in mind: *Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house...*” Many questions arise, the most obvious being, “what constitutes ‘something objectionable?’” There were two major views: infidelity is the only grounds for divorce or literally *anything* objectionable. (We will leave aside the issue of gender equality, which in ancient Jewish law did not exist; only males could divorce.)

As usual Jesus does not answer their question. There are two keys to understanding Jesus’ response. The first is the phrase *because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment*. It is easy to miss the irony. One would expect it the other way around—because of hard human hearts there should be no divorce allowed: make a commitment and stick to it no matter what. Yet this is not what Jesus says here: he acknowledges the hardness of the human heart; divorce is not God’s intention, but God is merciful. It might well be asked what other commandments were given because of our hard hearts? It is a trick question: the answer is all of them but God is forever and always merciful.

The second key involves how Jesus begins his teaching. He says: *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. Therefore, what God has joined together let no one separate.*

His enemies are interested in the grounds for divorce; Jesus talks about God’s intention *from the beginning*. Let us take a brief theological journey: God is divine, everlasting One-ness. God is one, without division or parts or attributes outside his own Being. All first century Jews would agree. God’s intention is to bring all things into union in God’s own divine One-ness. Since our lives are meant to reflect God’s nature acts of disunion thwart our vocation as God’s people. Therefore, divorce is not just a moral issue but a theological issue. This also explains what appears to us as strange rules in the Old Testament: commands to wear garments with one kind of thread or fabric, possessing only one kind of weighing device, keeping different types of food, especially meat and dairy separated, etc. God’s intention is to bring all that is divided into his own perfect Being in unity. We are to live that intention: therefore, marriage, monogamy, chastity, forgiveness, reconciliation, unity among Christians, etc. are more than just nice, moral feelings and actions. The way we live testifies to God’s Being.

Fixation on the grounds for divorce is not the answer. Fixing on God’s intention is. Jesus desires that we live God’s intention, rather than focus on human failure. Divorce occurs because of “*hardness of heart*”. God intention is one-ness for male and female, Jew and Greek, slave or free (I Corinthians 12:13), for the Church and all creation. Marriage participates in the re-unification of creation’s multiplicity. In the beginning united in harmony, because of sin male and female have become disassociated. Marriage is a testimony and participation in this truth of God’s Being and purpose. For Jesus, divorce transgresses this Truth; divorce is, at the least, a frustrating of God’s intention for all humanity of which marriage is a primary, although not exclusive, sign. At worst, divorce repudiates God’s Being and love. Yet disallowing re-marriage denies God’s mercy.

I would be remiss if I did not state clearly that divorce is not the unforgivable sin: divorce is tragic, hurtful and contrary to God’s will for humanity—however, heartbreak, pain and thwarting God’s will are never stronger than God’s healing mercy.

This sermon is not an encyclopedic treatment of marriage, divorce, and re-marriage. Perhaps more questions have been raised than answered. So, if you take away nothing else, hear this: with any of life’s issues always begin, continue and end with the nature of God’s Being and God’s purpose for all creation, and you cannot go far wrong. Amen.