

October 7, 2018

“Big Questions: What’s the Big Deal About Marriage?”

Genesis 2:18-25, Mark 10:1-16

After several weeks in the Book of Ephesians and then James, we are heading back into the Gospel readings from Mark – the lectionary focus for this year. What Jason and I saw as we looked at these passages together, were a bunch of questions; BIG Questions!

If you were here last week, we ended the letter from James with a strong word against whining, and an Old Testament story (Numbers 11:4-15) which showed us our tendency to whine about all kinds of things – including God’s daily provision. I got a great cartoon from someone with a bunch of nomadic types in the desert, collecting manna into baskets, and one of them praying, “O Lord, how about tuna-flavored manna shaped like tiny fish?”

I know James was clear about not whining, but can I whine for a moment about the lectionary? I don’t want to preach on this passage! This is a hard place to go. Not everyone has been married or is still married. There are difficult marital in this room that very few people know about – if any at all. And there are fragile hearts when it comes to marriage, divorce, and adultery. The last thing we want at FPC is to leave people feeling judged or ‘less than loved.’ And that may happen as I lead us through this passage. It would be easier to avoid the passage all together – which I have successfully done for 27 years . . . until today.

N.T. Wright observes, “In today’s church, particularly in the West, anyone who even reads verses 10-12 out loud is likely to be called cruel, unfeeling, unforgiving, exclusive, and a host of other names. So many people are bruised by the whole experience of marriage breakdown that to raise the topic, let alone take a strong line on it, seems (as they might say) ‘unChristian.’ (N.T. Wright in *Mark for Everyone*)

So at the risk of stirring up those feelings of judgment (which is not my intention at all), let’s look at the BIG Question posed to Jesus by the religious leaders of His day. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” (Mark 10:2b) Mark is quick to add that they wanted to trap Jesus more than have their question answered. In fact, the specific trap might be regarding the fact that Herod Antipas had married his brother, Philip’s, wife. Her name was Herodias. You might remember that John the Baptist spoke out about this and, literally, lost his head over it. Maybe they could get Jesus in trouble too.

Their question is, in many ways, benign. As I see it, the passage raises some bigger, scarier questions:

“What’s the Big Deal About Marriage?”

“What’s the Big Deal About Divorce?”

“What About Divorce, Adultery, Remarriage?”

First, “What’s the Big Deal About Marriage?” Our culture, as a whole, isn’t sold on its sacredness. Minimally, we can say that many people are, at least, ambivalent about its value or necessity.

The Pharisees don’t seem to see the seriousness and sacredness of marriage either. They want to know if divorce is allowable in the law. Jesus wants to talk about the beauty of marriage, and God’s original design for the first man and woman to become more than just themselves. The Pharisees want to hang out in the Book of Deuteronomy. Jesus wants to talk about creation and recite the poetry of Genesis 2. He wants to remind us of that it wasn’t good for man to be alone, that a man and a woman can become “one flesh,” and that there is the possibility of being “naked” and “unashamed.” And He’s not talking about superficial, skin deep nakedness. He’s talking about being real, vulnerable, and open with our spouses – with no fear, shame or guilt. If we could fully experience that kind of ‘shame-free, honest and vulnerable, marital intimacy’ this would be a much different world. You might even say it would be paradise.

But that’s not our reality, is it? Genesis 3 comes after paradise. And we watch Adam and Eve fall prey to temptation. In this state of freedom and paradise, the woman grabs for more and her husband does nothing to protect her. He goes completely passive and she’s taken out by the Enemy. And then he joins her. And, suddenly, there is blame and misunderstanding and brokenness . . . and a ‘covering up.’ We call this The Fall; and husbands and wives have been covering up ever since. And marriages fall apart as a result. Every one of us in this room knows someone whose marriage has unraveled; our parents’ marriage, the marriages of our adult children, the marriages of our good friends and co-workers . . . and even our own. In fact, divorce has become so common that we don’t even see it as that big of a deal. Which leads us to the next BIG Question.

“What’s the Big Deal About Divorce?”

Doesn’t the Bible allow it? Jesus asks the Pharisees what Moses had to say about it. And they know where the answer is found: “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; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house.” (Deuteronomy 24:1-3) They know exactly what Moses allowed and feel smug because they already have the answer to their question.

And then, as always, Jesus pushes them (and us) to face the deeper issue of our hard-heartedness, before lifting up God’s best intention and original design – as Genesis 2 makes clear. For Jesus, allowable doesn’t mean best . . . at all. He doesn’t even touch how male-centered all this was. [Jewish women couldn’t initiate divorce. When Jesus mentions a ‘woman divorcing her husband’ in verse 12, He is probably referring directly to Herodias divorcing her husband

Philip.] Nor does He focus on how ridiculous subsequent Jewish laws were – allowing men to “send their wives away” for the smallest of reasons. He doesn’t address any of that in this conversation (which doesn’t mean He is in agreement), but He does say – quite passionately – that “no one should split apart/separate what God has joined together.”

But these leaders already knew how God felt about divorce. Through the prophet Micah He says, “You cry out, ‘Why doesn’t the LORD accept my worship?’ I’ll tell you why! Because the LORD witnessed the vows you and your wife made when you were young. But you have been unfaithful to her, though she remained your faithful partner, the wife of your marriage vows. Didn’t the LORD make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are His. And what does He want? Godly children from your union. So guard your heart; remain loyal to the wife of your youth. ‘For I hate divorce!’ says the LORD, the God of Israel.” (Malachi 2:14-16a)

As in all our actions outside of God’s best intentions and will for our lives, there are consequences. And anyone who has been part of a divorce – personally or for a loved one – knows this first hand. Some are more costly or brutal than others, but I don’t think anyone is ever unscathed in a divorce. I’m sorry that we don’t have time for a more nuanced discussion about this. There are so many unique situations and stories that need clarification. I’m more than happy to listen to your stories and discuss them with you personally. But there’s another question I need to touch on as well:

“What About Divorce, Adultery, Remarriage?”

[Read verse 11-12.] We don’t have time for the implications this has for leadership in the Church, and the different ways churches come down on the issue, but that’s another conversation I’m happy to have with those of you who know my (and our church’s) rather hard stance on sexual ethics and leadership.

Here’s what I think Jesus is saying in answer to this question. ‘Divorcing and getting married to someone else is a big deal. Since marriage is about two becoming one flesh, splitting that oneness apart is never clean and complete. You will bring a piece of that person into your next marriage – as well as the pieces of you that added to the mess. To think you’re immune from that is unrealistic.

But I also think Jesus (and the whole of scripture) also says a lot about grace, and second chances, and new beginnings. If divorce is a sin – as is adultery, or lust – it is not any less forgivable than any other sin. There is nothing that is beyond the grace of God in Jesus Christ, when we turn toward God and acknowledge our brokenness and sin.

What is not okay – for any moral failure – is to move on without repentance or honest self-assessment. Too often, people do move on quite quickly – without forgiving an ex-spouse, or acknowledging his/her own part in what went wrong, or considering what really happened and

how it can be prevented in the future. And so the statistics for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> marriages show an even higher percentage of divorces. But, again, there is grace.

I don't have time to tell you the whole story about my stepdad, Bill, but there are a few details that illustrate how grace makes all things new. My mom barely dated for the first 6 years after my dad's death. But then I got the phone call at the beginning of my senior year of college. She had met the neighbor of her good friend at a barbeque. They had been spending a lot of time together. She wanted me to come home and meet him. And somewhere in the conversation she mentioned he'd been married twice before. Can you just see her only son puffing up his chest and going into protection mode?

After 31 years of marriage, they are a beautiful picture for me of the difference grace can make in healing the scars and sin of divorce. The church they're very involved in takes a different stance on divorce and leadership – and doesn't those who are divorced and remarried to serve as elders. But when Bill sold his business and retired at the age of 60, they hired him to become their Missions Pastor! Our God is the God of second chances. He makes all things new.

I want to give us a bonus question before we come to this table of grace. It jumps out in verses 13-16. "What About Divorce and Children?"

I was grateful that N.T. Wright raises this question in his commentary. "The next paragraph in Mark [v.13-16] reminds us of another dimension. Who, today, is liable to earn Jesus' anger at preventing little children feeling the warmth of God's love and welcome?" We may not like the answer he gives. "[It is] the people who suppose that children and their feelings don't matter, and that adults can make whatever arrangements suit them." (N.T. Wright in *Mark for Everyone*)

In this somewhat hypothetical discussion about marriage and divorce, let's never forget what else is at stake; make that WHO is at stake: children. In probably a dozen conversations over the years with couples in crisis, I have asked them to make sure that – whatever happens – they will remember their children. I have literally asked them to picture their son/daughter's band concert, sports banquet, high school graduation party, college commencement and wedding day and asked, "How will they feel if you proceed on this collision course? Is there a way, for their sake, that you can swallow your pride, own your stuff, try to uncover the fig leaves you have been hiding behind, and seek a new beginning?"

Again, N.T. Wright asks a very hard question: "Which is kinder, more Christian: to say that these things don't matter, or to take a strong line, like Jesus, on behalf of the truly weak and vulnerable?" (N.T. Wright in *Mark for Everyone*)

But taking a strong line, like Jesus, doesn't mean there isn't a full dose of grace that comes with the hard truth. And I'm so glad that we get to be reminded of that complete grace at this communion table. Here at the table we are reminded that, because of Jesus and His sacrificial love for us, we are family . . . no matter what!