

Text: Mark 10: 2-16  
Title: Wedged Between Shammai and Hillel  
Date: 10.05.09  
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There is no easy way into this text. There is ample opportunity for opening old wounds or inflicting new hurt. There is the possibility that it will be heard as an inconsequential antiquity or as some damning judgment. There is no easy way into this text.

It is an odd text for World Wide Communion Sunday. We'd welcome a more appropriate passage about the Cosmic Christ and the global village. We'd do better if we skipped the first part and read only about Jesus welcoming all the little children.

And yet, our brothers and sisters,  
    our parents and children,  
    our aunts and uncles,  
    our elders and deacons,  
    our politicians and preachers,  
    our friends and neighbors,

with all of them divorced it is a text that oddly fits World Wide Communion Sunday.  
It is a text that has to do with all of us.

And, while you may not want a finger-wagging-moralist the last thing you need is a fancy-pants-preacher who dismisses what Jesus says with what Jesus really meant to say. So,  
    with an open heart and desire to be re-orientated to the way and Word of God,  
    while wanting to be faithful to the text and honest with our experience,  
    with a pre-emptive apology for any line that could be construed or misconstrued as  
    hurtful or offensive,  
    with a deep desire to be compassionate,  
    and with the knowledge that I won't be able to tie it all up nice and tidy...

I invite you into this text.

On the surface it is an atrocious text.

Take my brother. He was married and divorced in his early twenties. When Sandi and I were first married he came and lived with us in our two bedroom apartment. I remember the day that he got his final divorce papers in the mail. He was beat up and lost. But, eventually he fell in love and married again, and twenty years later with two good and gifted kids, they are richly blessed with family and friend, and work, and travel, and love, and struggle, and growth, and, and... And according to Jesus in marrying again he is committing adultery! There is no easy way into this text.

The Pharisees came to Jesus to ask about a point of law. They didn't want to learn from Jesus; they wanted to put him to the test. They wanted his take on Deuteronomy 24:

*If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, And if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another*

*man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband....*

You get the idea.....

The debate of the day was about what constituted “something indecent about her.” It was acceptable for a husband to divorce his wife ~ not vice versa ~ but the question was over the rationale.

In first century Palestine two rabbinical schools were developing: *ben shammai* and *ben hillel* ~ the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel. These two rabbis represent two traditions of interpretation. For Shammai the only ground for divorce was infidelity. For Hillel the indecency that allowed for divorce was much more fluid. If a wife burned the pot roast or raised her voice in a manner that was embarrassing ~ those events qualified as lawful reasons for divorce. One disciple of Hillel offered that a certificate of divorce was acceptable “if he found another fairer than she.”

So, the Pharisees came to Jesus to wedge him between Shammai and Hillel. They wanted to see where he stood. But!

But, Jesus changes the game. Jesus doesn't enter into a discussion about legal precedent and case law. He doesn't side with Shammai or Hillel. He doesn't say that divorce is acceptable in cases of adultery nor does he open the door for a divorce based on bad poached eggs or boredom. He doesn't dismiss the law, instigate a stricter interpretation, or suggest liberal loopholes....

Jesus changes the whole ground of the discussion.

Rather than talk about divorce; Jesus talks about marriage.

Rather than talk about what Moses wrote; Jesus talks about what God intended.

Rather than talk about the law; Jesus talks about creation.

Dear friends, Jesus re-orientates the whole discussion to what God made and what God meant. He goes back to the beginning and captures the original will of God. He paints a beautiful picture of two becoming one. He lifts up the intention of God that marriage would be a relationship of mutual love, respect, fidelity, self giving, and unity ~ an expression of *shalom*.

And, in doing so he asserts that divorce is not part of what God intended. Marriage as imaged in creation is a clearer picture of will and way of God than the “trouble shooting” legal provisions of Moses.

This is not dismissing our “sinful and selfish tendency” to break what God has created. This is not diminishing the reality that marriages can end up as abusive and intolerable hells or soul deadening slogs. This is not denying that in this broken creation sometimes the best choice is divorce. It is the recognition that marriage is part of God's creational landscape.

And, then as either proclamation or plea he adds:

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

Maybe it's because I taught and coached high school kids for ten years, but I've done more than my fair share of weddings. Somewhere along the way I've become quite the little wedding planner. I've done weddings in grand cathedrals and sweaty little chapels, in trailer parks and zoos, on castle lawns and sandy beaches, in hotels and furniture factories. And, it is a remarkable gift to stand in front of two who are making promises to be one and know that even with the fears or doubts that they can barely voice their hope is rooted in God's creative order. There is something refreshingly simple and remarkably redemptive about that moment.

It is an expression of trust.

It is an expression of hope.

It is a re-orientation to what God intends.

It is an act of creation ~ making something new.

So, when that new marriage stumbles and struggles and grows stale,  
or if it becomes an angry chokehold,  
or if somebody breaks the trust,  
or if it slowly dies of neglect,

divorce is not just the disassembling of a legal contract between two parties but it is a death.

And, while sometimes divorce is an expression of grace and the possibility exists that there will be great and glorious days of re-creation, divorce is the death of created intent.

One side bar:

When Jesus so strongly and starkly states God's desire for marriage he is siding with the weak. In first century Palestine, where women rarely owned property, marriage meant a guarantee of support for the most vulnerable ~ women and children. Without the protection of laws against divorce, women were totally at the mercy of their husbands and fathers. To be divorced was to be cast out without a safety net. So, even in affirming marriage Jesus puts himself on the side of the weak and vulnerable.

Divorce is the death of *shalom*, the death of created intent.

Look, dear friends, I don't know what to do with the lines about adultery and marrying again. There is little wiggle room. As one scholar writes:

*The practical application of this teaching in a society in which both adultery and divorce are common and legally permissible cannot be straightforward. But, Mark's Jesus offers no direct guidance on the problem, simple a clear and unequivocal, and utterly uncompromising principle that marriage is permanent and divorce is wrong...*

(Gulp...)

Wrong as created intent? Yeah.

But, wrong in every case in this crooked world,  
wrong for those of who are fallen and finite,  
wrong for every time and place? No.

Sometimes divorce itself is siding with the weak and the vulnerable.  
Sometimes divorce is a saving grace.  
Sometimes divorce, while still a death, is the best that we can do.

So, I don't know what to do with all of this. I think we're left with going to other texts and other images of Jesus, and other ways of seeing life through the lens of the cross. And, maybe, just maybe, that is why Mark links this exchange about divorce with the welcoming of children....

The text reads that the disciples were shooing away the children. Evidently they saw them as a nuisance to the important business of debating the finer points of divorce law. But, an indignant Jesus rebukes them and receives the children with a hug and a word of blessing. And then he adds: (Paraphrased)

*This is the Kingdom that you're worrying about....*

*This is the intended created order...*

*This is what I desire....*

*Children as children ~ not puffed up with piety, not getting the law right, not navigating the loopholes, simply themselves ~ all scuffed knees and runny noses.*

A. Katherine Grieb says it this way:

*The reign of God is open to those who receive it the way a little child receives it—as sheer gift to those with no power, no rights, no demands, no status and no sense of their own achievement.*

*Whether we have married or not, whether we have succeeded in marriage or failed ~ or some of each, we are not rejected children. We are not kept away from Jesus. We are loved, welcomed and blessed by the God who made us, both male and female, for God's own self. What God has so joined together, no human being can ever separate.*

Sandi, my wife, was worried about this sermon ~ probably still is. But, in talking about it she said, "We're all divorced. We're all divorced from creation, we're all divorced from each other, we're all divorced from our selves, and we're all divorced from God. Can't it just be about that?"

Maybe it is.

No matter where you're divorced.

No matter where you're dead.

No matter where this is no wiggle room.

Come to the table as a sign and seal of reconciliation and resurrection,

Come to the table as a sign and seal of creation's intent,

Come to the table of that great banquet where there is a place for whole wide world.

Come to the table. Amen.