

LET THEM COME

Pentecost 20-B

October 7, 2018

Mark 10:2-16

This is the kind of tough text that most of us don't really want to have to deal with, much less preach about. Divorce is a difficult topic to talk about; but it's an even more difficult thing to experience, because the real people involved are caught up on in sadness, pain, defeat, and a terrible sense of loss. To every person who is going through, or has been through divorce, the experience is unique and very personal. So there's really no *one-size fits all* answer to the issue, either for people who are in the midst of divorce, or even for the church's response and care.

Here are a few ideas I've gathered from today's gospel reading, and a little bit of what I believe about Jesus' teaching on divorce.

First, our evangelist tells us that the Pharisees came to Jesus "to test him." That tells me that they are probably less concerned about the law on divorce than they are looking to see if Jesus is going to say something that goes against *their* interpretation of the law of Moses. It's not about divorce as much as it is about their sense of order and their power to control.

Pastor David Lose notes: "...up to this point, at least from the point of view of the Pharisees, Jesus has been regularly transgressing much of what seemed to lend order to their world. Feeding everyone, not just some (notice the first feeding story in Mark 6 comes right after Herod's exclusive feast); healing those with illness normally attributed to sin; challenging traditions about Sabbath; praising the faith of a Syrophenician woman (even if, at first, he himself couldn't have imagined doing that); and criticizing the Pharisees themselves, the community's regular arbiters of the law." [David Lose: "In the Meantime," posted 10/11/18 at www.davidlose.net]

In other words, the Pharisees want to see how far Jesus is willing to take this. But when we hear what Jesus has to say, it appears the Pharisees "bit off more than they could chew." Jesus not only talked about divorce being against God's intention, but suggested that those who divorce and remarry could be considered adulterers. Those are shocking words, but they remind us that the covenant of marriage is not to be taken lightly. And there are many people who don't or haven't considered how important it is to pledge one's love for another before God and a room full of witnesses.

Something else I found shocking was that Jesus talked about the possibility that the woman could initiate the divorce, even when the action wasn't precipitated by the husband's infidelity.

Traditional Jewish culture (and almost every other) did not offer such an option or power or independence to women. This is one of those surprising places in scripture where Jesus argues for equality among the sexes. So, you want to know how far Jesus will go with his teaching? He will demand radical inclusiveness. Because that's the sign of the inbreaking of God's kingdom.

Good News means that traditional boundaries are erased. And I think that's where the gospel takes us: to places we wouldn't normally consider, to rights we might be tempted not to grant, to acceptance we would just prefer to avoid.

Again, children come into play in this snippet of gospel, because people/parents are bringing children to Jesus to be touched—that is, healed. The disciples try to shoo them away, because they were probably annoyed, tired of, and perhaps even embarrassed by what I'm guessing was a particularly poverty-stricken, messy, smelly group of parents (perhaps mostly mothers) and noisy

children. To the disciples in the presence of Pharisees and Jesus himself, it probably felt like the equivalence of beggars crashing a royal wedding.

But just as Jesus stood up for women who were considered powerless in traditional society of his day, so also Jesus stands up for “the least of these”—that is, the most vulnerable of all: children.

More than that, he declares what is probably the most radical statement of all: It is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs. Not to the mighty, the powerful, the decision-makers, the wealthy. No, this kingdom that Jesus is speaking about belongs to those who most need acceptance, love, healing, and power. And if there’s anything that shocked the Pharisees, and most likely, even the disciples, it is this breaking down of the traditional order of things—the order which Pharisees considered as “law”—and Jesus’ radical introduction of a new order which was a threat, of course, to “the powers that be.”

Those who set up a trap for Jesus got what they wanted: evidence that Jesus was corrupting their order. And, as they felt their power draining from them, they most certainly schemed and planned to keep this “Teacher” from rising to prominence. Ultimately, they would get their way, as Jesus would be put to death. But their way could not stop what God, through Jesus, wanted for God’s creation. Jesus would become one among “the least of these,” as he became vulnerable in order to allow the world to witness the strength of God.

Yes, we still have plenty of evidence of brokenness and inequality all around us. In fact, sometimes it seems that we take one step forward and two steps backward. But the raising of Jesus reassures us—especially the most broken among us—that the old order will not have the last word. Know that even for those who have been divorced, *divorce* does not define them. Likewise, no other form of brokenness defines us. Instead, Jesus promises us that our true identity reveals that we are children of God and heirs of eternal life, the reign of God over all. Let the children, the broken, the most vulnerable, the ones who feel that they have nothing more to lose—come! Amen.