Sunday, 10/3/21

**Mark 10:1-16**

1He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them.

2Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” 3He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” 4They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” 5But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 6But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ 7‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, 8and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

10Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; 12and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

13People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” 16And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

**Sermon**

Another week, and another difficult passage. Not only is this passage challenging, it makes Jesus sound like two different people. Last week I talked about the Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild that many modern readers of the Bible prefer—the one who seemed to be absent from last week’s reading. This week’s passage ends with Jesus blessing the children. This sounds like something that Gentle Jesus would do. First, though, we have to get through the difficult teaching on divorce. This week a lot of lectionary preachers are probably looking at the other passages. It’s hard to blame them: last week Jesus talked about cutting your hands and feet off if they cause you to sin, and now he’s forbidding divorce. I’m reminded of a scene from *The Simpsons* from many years ago: one of the children asks Homer (never very articulate or well-informed) what religion the family practices. Homer dithers for a moment before coming up with, “Oh, you know, the one with all the rules. You know, Christianity.” It’s easy to get discouraged: divorce is common now, and passages like this one often lead preachers to claim that it’s always off limits.

Jesus probably doesn’t mean exactly that, though. The Pharisees—experts in religious law and Jesus’s perennial adversaries—come to Jesus with a question. Mark tells us that they’re not so much asking for wisdom as “testing him.” They want Jesus to tell them whether it’s lawful for a man to divorce his wife. They’re not interested in Jesus’s take on God’s will. They’re asking about human tradition about divorce, and they hope that Jesus will stumble over the answer so they can show the crowd that Jesus doesn’t know the rules that the Pharisees teach. (I imagine them wearing black capes and their twirling mustaches.) Jesus turns the question around on them: scripture says that a man and a woman are joined together by God as one flesh and shouldn’t be separated. The caveat that divorce is permissible in some circumstances (attested in several places in Scripture) is an accommodation made in recognition of man’s hard-heartedness. The Pharisees’ attempt to trip Jesus by testing his knowledge of the rule is a symptom of that hard-heartedness.

Where does this leave us? Is divorce a sin? Is it ever permissible? Jesus’s answer to the Pharisees indicates that it’s not a best-case scenario, but sometimes it’s necessary, and God always gives grace. That a commandment to allow for divorce exists proves that God realizes that no situation is ever ideal, and God is aware of people’s hard-heartedness. Two people are meant to be “one flesh”—in fellowship with each other, supporting and loving one another—but a way out is provided if the relationship isn’t loving. The Pharisees aren’t concerned with nurturing loving relationships or with a providing either party an “out” if the relationship sours or turns abusive. They want to know if Jesus can quote their rule correctly. It’s not coincidental that they sound sexist when they ask, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Generally it was easier for a man to get a divorce than for a woman; this had the potential to leave women trapped in unhappy or abusive relationships, or to be left vulnerable when the husband that a woman would at that time have relied on for financial support decided to leave her. Jesus is concerned with loving, supportive relationships. The Pharisees are more interested in their rules.

Modern readers like to see the Pharisees as one-dimensional characters for Jesus to demonstrate his righteousness in opposition to, but they’re not that different from many Christians. We’re often too focused on rules or decorum to recognize God’s image in other people.

* The desire for righteousness turns into legalism: who follows the rules?
* We forget to protect the vulnerable or nurture relationships

Mark demonstrates a healthier approach to faith in the second part of this passage. Jesus’s openness to children isn’t there to cleanse the palate after a difficult passage on divorce. It’s to show the kind of faith Jesus wants us to have.

* Trust God like a parent
* Be open to different ideas about God
* Don’t make rules/try to be the authority figure
* The disciples don’t want to welcome children—they’re a bit like the Pharisees