

Mark 10:2–16 (LEB)

And they asked him if it was permitted for a man to divorce *his* wife, *in order to* test him. And he answered *and* said to them, “What did Moses command you?” So they said, “Moses permitted *a man* to write a certificate of divorce and to send *her* away.” But Jesus said to them, “He wrote this commandment for you because of your hardness of heart. But from the beginning of creation ‘he made them male and female. Because of this a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh,’ so that they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, man must not separate.”

And in the house again the disciples began to ask him about this. And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband *and* marries another, she commits adultery.”

And they were bringing young children to him so that he could touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. But *when* Jesus saw *it*, he was indignant, and said to them, “Let the young children come to me. Do not forbid them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not welcome the kingdom of God like a young child will never enter into it.” And *after* taking *them* into his arms, he blessed them, placing his hands on them.

Thy Kingdom Come

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: October 4, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Mark 10:2–16

It appears that marriage and divorce must have been as hot button issues in Jesus' time as they are in ours. His opponents ask Jesus about divorce to test him. It's like other questions they ask him: is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Answer one way and the Roman authorities are after you; answer the other way and you risk being a traitor to your people.

In the case of divorce the stakes in the answer to the question may be even higher. Back toward the beginning of the Gospel we read how John the Baptist met his end. He went around publicly criticizing King Herod, and why? John criticized Herod because Herod stole his brother's wife Herodias and married her. As you recall, John the Baptist eventually lost his head for censuring the king. So when Jesus is asked about divorce, it's a dicey question. Somewhat surprisingly he jumps in with both feet. He says, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband *and* marries another man, she commits adultery." Jesus is a little more egalitarian than many of his contemporaries. He allows for the possibility that both men and women can divorce each other, but he condemns it either way. It's easy to imagine that Herod and probably a lot of others found his answer unpopular.

A couple of thousand years later the risk somewhat less but not entirely absent. I have preached in this congregation for thirty-two years. I've preached way over a thousand sermons. As far as I can recall, I have never preached on this text. Many marriages end in divorce. My own first one did. There are plenty of people out there willing to use the Bible to condemn divorce and blame it for all manner of societal ill. I've never felt inclined, or quite honestly in the position, to take up the topic. So, for thirty two years I have fastidiously avoided this passage. It comes around frequently in the assigned readings, but I've always chosen another.

Well, no longer. With retirement on the horizon, this is my last chance. Today I am going to talk about it.

Jesus says that Moses allowed divorce because of human hardness of heart. The phrase here appears just three times in the New Testament, and it was Greek rendering of the Hebrew phrase 'uncircumcised heart'. Hardness of heart means uncircumcised heart. So, you see my strategy here. To distract you from being offended by talk of divorce, I'll offend you by talking about circumcision. That will make you squirm for different reason.

Well, as you may guess, my intentions are more noble than that. As you know, circumcision was the sign God gave to the Israelites to mark the covenant between God and the people. It was meant to signify that the people would undergo a fundamental shift in outlook and intention. What was a physical sign of the covenant in reality aimed at an inner transformation. Deuteronomy and Jeremiah implored the people to circumcise their hearts. They implored the people to commit their hearts to God's vision for them as a people. They said, "So you shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn. For Yahweh your God executes justice for the orphan and widow, and *he is* one who loves *the* alien, to give to them

food and clothing. And you shall love the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” You shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart and live rightly with one another.

When Jesus tells his listeners that Moses made allowance for divorce because of their hardness of heart, we should resist reading that as if it were saying that Moses made allowance for divorce because the people were immoral, evil, mean-spirited, cruel and nasty. Jesus looks to the God of his Biblical faith, the God who seeks to change the people far more than punish them. Jesus pointed to the brokenness of the human condition. It is the human condition that our best intentions fall short, that our hearts are at best in the process of transformation. Unlike the physical sign of circumcision, the circumcision of the heart is an ongoing project. It is the human condition that we fall short and that we cause of great pain and suffering for ourselves and others as far as the eye can see. God loves refugees, aliens if you will, and wishes for them food and clothing. God loves the widow and orphan and wishes for them wellbeing. God loves the homeless and the lost. God loves humanity and wishes that it would live together in love, peace and respect. And God weeps that in our human condition we find ourselves incapable of living out even the best of our intentions. Jesus was not condemning his listeners when he talked about their hard heartedness as much as he was speaking frankly of their brokenness.

He was saying that our human brokenness causes relationships to fail and that failed relationships cause further brokenness, not the least to the children. That may sound harsh, but speaking from my own experience I can certainly agree with him. Jesus is not pulling any punches. Human shortcomings have consequences, sometimes terrible consequences. But I find comfort in the fact that even as he clear about the pain we cause one another, Jesus doesn't respond with condemnation but with love and compassion instead. Jesus doesn't roam the streets seeing how many tickets to hell he can hand out. He roams the streets looking for the broken and wounded to lift up. He says earlier in the Gospel, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

In part he lifted the broken by encouraging them to change. Jesus, and John the Baptist before him, envisioned a society in which justice would roll down like flowing streams, in which mercy for those in need would be the order of the day, in which the wolf and the lamb would feed together, in which spears would be beaten into pruning hooks, and in which relationships, whether in families or between nations, would be healthy and good. This society they dreamed of they called the kingdom of God. This kingdom of God was no theoretical, pie in the sky idea for them, nor was it heaven to be entered only after death. This kingdom of God was this world the way God intended it to be. And most important, this kingdom of God was in sight, in front of them, coming. They could almost feel and taste it. They hungered and thirsted after it.

Blessed are the meek, those who mourn, the peacemakers and so on, not so much because they will be rewarded in heaven, or rewarded at all in some selfish sense, but because they will be a part of ushering in this kingdom of God, part healing the world. In Judaism it is called tikkun olam. The blessings Jesus catalogs in the Beatitudes will come to be because the world will change its unjust and vicious ways and become the kingdom of God, become a healed creation, become tikkun olam.

Kierkegaard once said that to be a Christian is to make a leap of faith. The leap, in one way of saying it, is to believe that this yearning, hungering and thirsting we have for the kingdom of God is real. It is to leap to the conclusion that if we try to live by the ideals of the kingdom of God, we will be heading in the right direction, playing a part in the healing.

But the leap of faith is also to believe that when we try and yet fail to circumcise or soften our hearts that God is there to encourage us in both meanings of the word: to encourage us

not to give up and to encourage us to believe that no matter how badly things are broken God's support is constant and God's kingdom will come.

Jesus calls us to mature way of being religious. Jesus calls us to a faith that exposes the broken human condition for what it is. That is, Jesus calls us to a faith that requires us to face ourselves in the mirror and recognize the consequences of the way we live. But he also calls us to a faith built on a hope, against all appearances, that God's kingdom will come. As religious people, we are called also to lift up such a faith, a faith that allows accountability for the pain we cause but also kindheartedness in the face of our brokenness.

I like to think of it as walking the Knife's Edge. On the very last leg of the Appalachian Trail, just before the summit of Mt. Katahdin in Maine, hikers must traverse the Knife's Edge. [Slide] As you can see it is a very narrow trail with steep drop offs on both sides. Step off the trail to either side and you may fall into the abyss. Often time the Christian life is pictured as a straight and narrow path on which only a few are perfect enough to survive. In truth, no one survives the path of perfection. That is the human condition.

So I prefer to think of the narrow path as the path people of faith should take when considering that human condition in themselves or in others. The abyss on one side is a religion that seeks to condemn. The abyss on the other side is a religion that does not take seriously human brokenness. The path on the Knife's Edge helps circumcise the human heart and leads ultimately to the kingdom of God. Amen.