

Mark 10:2-16

Divorce is a huge issue for both our society and the individuals it touches. And that would be virtually every family either through being a divorced person, having a divorced member, or knowing someone well. So hopefully we can treat this matter with pastoral sensitivity. At one of my previous congregations, Brunswick Uniting, I counted twenty-nine of the contact list. Hey, that is a decent sized congregation in most Uniting Churches! But there is a positive side. The divorce rate has been dropping in Australia for the past 30 years. A few reasons – vast majority (over 80% of people) are living together and a lot of those relationships either simply choose not to marry, or separate before they make it to marriage. So those people who do choose to marry they are going to be older, more experienced, more sure of themselves and their partner and what would by then have been a long term relationship. To further complicate matters in this area of divorce we have to factor in a Pandemic and same sex marriage. Still, about 30% of marriages end in divorce.

But we don't learn! Those who were married previously are statistically more likely to get married and divorced again. Up to 60% of second marriages end in divorce.

Divorce is tough on a couple, emotionally, financially, psychologically, physically, tough on children, on grandparents, (now there is a largely hidden group who are impacted when their children divorce) friends who try to straddle both relationships (for a while anyway!) and assorted others who get caught up.

I well recall the day I stood before my congregation at Brunswick with a prepared statement I read because I did not trust myself to find the right words under the pressure of announcing to the congregation my then wife and I were separating. I felt exposed, shamed, powerless, a failure. I had grown up with the notion that a minister is meant to be some sort of role model and it was especially before the younger members of that community I felt I had let them down and unworthy to be their minister. The congregation were fine, very accepting and accommodating. Only time I felt a pinch of judgement was the woman who said to me, "Well I hope you have prayed about this", as if you would casually cast aside 26 years of marriage, the two kids you had brought into the world together. Not many other jobs you have to stand up and make a public statement announcing you and your spouse are going their separate ways. There are a few where you might do it, but not too many. And to heighten all this, in fact to precisely double down on it, my wife was also a Uniting Church minister.

There are a variety of positions in the wider Christian church about divorce but the Uniting Church takes the view that divorce (and remarriage) of course are not God's intention but a sign of both our human incapacity to keep promises, vows, commitments we have made (Jesus point in today's reading) but, and this is the Uniting Church's position) God's mercy and compassion that we are not forever constrained behind life denying commitments we once made that may now be sucking the life juices out of us.

Let's turn to the bible reading. I am divorced, I am remarried but through all that I have never once thought of myself as an adulterer (ugly word, but I guess what it is referring to is also ugly). But I read Jesus' words in today's gospel and think.... Hmmm... It seems so final, no wriggle room. There it is in black and white, does not seem any grounds for a legitimize divorce. Divorce and remarry it is to be consider adultery.

Let's have a bit of a closer look at the Mark text for today. Jesus' comments about divorce arise in response to a question from the Pharisees. We are told straight up front by Mark that once again Jesus is being set up. ... "and to test him they asked"... What is their motivation in raising this issue of divorce? Why is it a test? Most likely Jesus has been heard to teach against divorce, and the Pharisees want to trap him, because *Moses* allowed for divorce.

In many ways it is a funny sort of question for these Pharisees to put to Jesus. It is a no-brainer in the terms it is put. Of course divorce is lawful. Divorce was allowed in the law if a man "finds something objectionable/indecent in his wife, then he can put her away". But the divorce in Jewish law was a far thing from the divorce my wife and I anguished over. The divorce Jesus is discussing was all heavily, more than heavily, totally, slanted around men's rights. Only men could divorce their wives, (the later reference in this passage about women divorcing men reflects the Greek/ Roman setting of the early church). And only men could commit adultery, and only with a married woman. So a man having sexual relations outside marriage does not commit adultery against his wife, but against the husband of the woman he has the affair with.

So this whole exchange happens not with the Pharisees wanting to find the heart of a long and sustained and fulfilling marriage, but it is kind of like a race to the bottom. What is the narrowly legalistic basis of marriage and divorce? And everyone knew that already. Everyone in Judaism would have agreed Moses allowed divorce. The only room for discussion really was the grounds for divorce.

And whole schools of thought grew up around the interpretation of that word that is translated objectionable or indecent. Does it mean displeasing i.e. a man grows tired of his wife, because he does not like her cooking, or she snorts loudly when she laughs or whatever. That was one interpretation. And the other was that indecent referred specifically and to only one thing... to her being unfaithful. That was the grounds for divorce.

It seems this is the test. Who is Jesus going to side with and who is he going to alienate by his answer. Jesus refuses to answer in the same hard hearted legalistic spirit that he thinks this question is asked. He responds by protesting that this matter of marriage and divorce is not ever to be reduced to the level of what legal loopholes can we find to allow us to do what we want.

Jesus is saying that if you treat something like marriage as just a set of laws to be complied with, then you are missing the whole point of what God is on about and what human relationships are intended for. Jesus point is not to make a blanket condemnation of all divorced people. Rather, he is criticising religious teachers who exploit the law in order to maintain their own veneer of righteousness while behaving abusively towards their wives and children.

So how do we take these words of Jesus seriously but with some understanding of what has provoked them and the cultural and historical context. That is, we interpret the sayings of Jesus pastorally or with love.

You can actually see precisely the process of interpretation and application of teaching about divorce going on in the New Testament. When Matthew (written later than Mark's gospel) has Jesus teaching on marriage and divorce there is not a blanket prohibition, rather Jesus is portrayed as inserting the words, "except for adultery." There is to be no divorce and remarriage except in the circumstances of adultery. Matthew makes a pastoral exception. Then, the Apostle Paul interprets Jesus' clear demand and makes a second exception: if you are married to a non-believer, and that person wants to leave the marriage, then that couple can divorce. And so the early church gave two exceptions in the spirit of love.

Now, if you make these two exceptions into watertight laws, then there are only two exceptions: adultery and married to a non-believer. But I believe and so does our church that there are other exceptions to Jesus' demand and these exceptions are not delineated in the Bible. For example, what if your spouse has been abusing you for years and years, beating you up physically so your body is black and blue and you have to lie about it or wear clothing to cover up? What if your spouse is an emotional abuser, like a use of Chinese water torture so you can't see it, and your black and blue marks are in your emotions or spirit? What if your spouse is sexually abusing your children or grandchildren? What if there is no abuse but there is just nothing. Cold distance that is eroding your soul and you do not fight but you just quietly scream internally until you fear one day you may not even be able to raise the energy any longer to inwardly grieve. These are situations not listed in the Bible. And we need to interpret the passage about divorce in Mark 10 as we approach all such passages: with love, with pastoral concern. To take such passages literally may result in the opposite of love, leaving many people living in an awful, human situation.

