



## “A Community of the Broken and Blessed”

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*Mark 10:2-16*

Now, let's be honest. Who felt uncomfortable during the scripture reading this morning? Who felt we could've skipped this scripture completely, or at least just mentioned the part about the children coming to Jesus? Well, you're not alone. I checked in with several of my pastor friends and none of them were eager to write a sermon on this text. In fact, one of them commented with the phrase, “This lectionary text is yuck.” Ok, so that was my response, but a lot of them felt the same way. Some of my friends even skipped it completely by substituting a different reading altogether or by focusing on the epistle lesson.

The Gospel reading today is a hard one and I, too, was tempted to go with something completely different. And although I stuck with this heavy reading, I almost dropped the first part of the text about divorce and marriage and only focused on the cute and innocent portion where children are loved by Jesus and brought into the community. But, in the end, it's important to deal with these hard parts of the Bible, these places we want to ignore, these stories we would rather not wrestle with. What I've come to realize is that if we don't give attention to this first section about divorce and marriage, then it is difficult to understand that the community of Jesus, just like our community here at church, in our homes, and in our nation, is a community of both the broken and the blessed, of both the valuable and the vulnerable, of both the voiced and the voiceless.

As you probably noticed, today's Gospel lesson consists of two stories. One deals with marriage and divorce, the other with the hindering and then the blessing of little children. I wonder if the people who created the lectionary decided to keep these two stories together to help out poor preachers like me who were frustrated and overwhelmed by this challenging divorce text. I mean, as we have seen with our celebration of Cookie and Theresa and their love of our kids, it is so much more pleasant to talk about the precious children and those who love them. Right?

And I know, divorce isn't an easy sermon topic and I'm sure it brings up a lot of emotions and feelings from every single one of us here. Divorce is a complicated thing and it was indeed complicated for those living in the first century as well. You see, the ancient world was patriarchal, and wives were regarded as the property of their husbands. For Jews at the time, only the husband could divorce his wife. That was the law. So, I realize that Jesus' thoughts on divorce were pretty confusing for his disciples. But, let's get real, the disciples misunderstood Jesus all the time. Their misunderstanding of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark was getting rather old, don't you think? They were confused by his teachings, his parables, and his description of what a Messiah should actually be. And in our text this morning, he spoke in riddles yet again. Rather than talk about divorce, Jesus mentioned the equality of men and women in marriage as his answer to a test by the Pharisees. Did you catch that? Jesus's answer to the religious leaders trying to stump him about divorce and who has power in a relationship was answered with a nod back to Genesis and creation, where God made humankind and how men and women were

created equally. And, apparently, this was enough to satisfy the plotting Pharisees. But the disciples, oh yes, they were still confused.

So, when the disciples and Jesus went into a house to escape the crowds and to rest, they bothered Jesus again about this enigmatic answer. This time Jesus seemed fed up and in a rare moment of candor, blatantly blurted out what he really meant. “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” Jesus was frustrated at broken relationships. Jesus was frustrated that people would be hurt, especially women. Jesus referred back to Genesis and creation because relationships between humans and with God was the most important thing.

But if broken relationships did happen, Jesus knew the vulnerable must be protected. The Pharisees wanted to trap Jesus, to test his dedication to the equal and fair treatment of all of God’s people, especially women, and they pressured him to recite the law that gave men power over women regarding divorce. But you remember what Jesus said to the religious leaders? He asked them, “What did Moses command of you?” Jesus answered their question with a question as he often did. His non-answer forced the Pharisees to remember the God of creation, the God who loves all, each and every person.

But the dense disciples didn’t get it. They still at this point didn’t realize that the suffering servant Messiah had come to bring into the circle, into the community, all people who were hurt and left out and bruised and broken. He had come so that all might know they were created by God and loved by God. And so, in Jesus’ private teaching to his disciples, he spoke both of the conditions under which a man could leave his wife, and also under which a woman could leave her husband. One commentator writes, “Even in the context of such a negative exhortation, the implication that women have agency in initiating a divorce is a departure from Greco-Roman norms of marriage in which the woman was regarded as property transacted from father to husband.” He goes on to state, “The institution of marriage in the ancient world bears little resemblance to marriage in the modern world and is undertaken for largely different reasons and in a decidedly less patriarchal context. So, what this text demonstrates is Jesus’ desire to empower women beyond their current social state.”

Y’all, I never noticed this before. I remember struggling with our Wednesday night Bible study folks on this exact text. Eventually I couldn’t deal with the discomfort and so we just kind of skimmed on by it. But I see it now. Jesus was protecting and promoting the most vulnerable in society. He was elevating women who were caught in a legal contract in which they had no rights. He knew the harsh fates of first-century women after they divorced. Had a woman found herself divorced, her economic options would’ve vanished. Divorce meant destitution. So, when Jesus told the religious leaders, the disciples, all men, that they should not separate from their wives, on a deeper, more foundational level, he was protecting women from an unjust fate that was beyond their control. He was turning brokenness into blessing.

Father David Henson, an Episcopal Priest, wrote an opinion piece entitled *Just Marriage: Jesus, Divorce, and the Vulnerable*. In his passionate article he challenged our reading of this difficult text. He said, “Christian churches who emphasize the sinfulness of divorce based on this text miss the heart of Jesus’ teaching. The ethical force behind the teaching isn’t that divorce is wrong, but that treating women as unequal to men, as possessions, is blasphemous as both were made in the image of God.” Which means, if we assess Jesus’ teaching in his first-century

context about the empowering of women and we too seek to live out his words in our own time and place, we will be true and softhearted Jesus followers who celebrate that women are equal creations of the Divine and have all the same rights and access as men.

Since Jesus was speaking more about God’s creative love and less about the topic of divorce, we too should follow the way of Christ by being a nation, a people that values the position and power of women in our society. We do this when we improve access for women to healthcare. We do this when we address issues of poverty that disproportionately affect women. We do this when we guarantee women equal pay for equal work. We do this when we change our aggressive, masculine culture that threatens the safety of women. We do this when we believe what women have to say. Even when Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried, the followers of Jesus, who were women, were instructed by the angels to proclaim the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. No one believed them. Do you remember the scripture in Luke? “When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.” Jesus set the example by elevating women to equal status and even commissioned them to be the first proclaimers of the gospel! Oh, why must we be those disciples who just don’t understand the all-inclusive love of Jesus?

In order to understand Jesus, we can’t neglect the second narrative in our Gospel Lesson today about children either because it is just as important as the first story about the equality of women. The disciples, who had just been schooled by Jesus about the importance of women and that they were not property and should have equal agency, were rebuked by Jesus yet again for holding back children from coming to him. And we must understand this story alongside the first. Jesus moved from criticizing the effects of patriarchy on married couples, probably parents, to in turn discussing and valuing children. But the children were held back from Jesus, and they were sternly scolded by the disciples because of their marginal position in society. Again, Jesus surprised the waiting and listening crowds by insisting that the least-valued, most vulnerable be brought forward; from the margins to the middle, from the edges to the center, from the places of brokenness to the power of blessing.

Do you remember several weeks ago when the disciples argued about who was the greatest, and Jesus asserted that “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all?” And then Jesus took a child in his arms and said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me?” Well, a mere twenty-five verses later parents brought their children to Jesus and we thought the disciples would finally get it right and indeed welcome the children. Yet, the disciples blocked the children and this time Jesus was ticked. Why hadn’t the disciples learned anything? A true, Jesus-like response would have been to be angry, like Jesus, when people didn’t welcome the vulnerable and the outcast. For “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as we receive a little child, will never enter it.”

But we can’t blame the disciples, for in the culture of Jesus’ time where honor and shame were decisive factors in determining behavior, people would’ve been very eager to welcome someone of high status and prestige whose company could’ve increased one’s own honor. Children, however, were of very low status. There was no value in welcoming a child. So, when Jesus displayed that the reception of God’s kingdom was like the welcoming of a child, he was

proclaiming again that God was not experienced in power, but in weakness. Entering God's loving commonwealth was not a way to become first or great or the best, but a way to identify with the least and to build a community of both the broken and the blessed.

And just like Jesus' earlier teaching on divorce, it is important to see that Jesus understood the gravity of children's experiences, the experience of the vulnerable. Jesus understood that the choices he made to include all of God's people in the wide and all-encompassing love of the Divine would help develop future generations to be more inclusive and focused on the present kingdom. John Allen, a UCC minister said this, "Jesus understands childhood as a point in human development when the ethic of God's kingdom has an unparalleled opportunity to interrupt intergenerational transmissions of trauma and ongoing cycles of violence and retribution. The kingdom received by a child interrupts the intergenerational transmission of racism, homophobia, sexism, and violence. This teaching does not call us to abandon the sophisticated thought of adulthood to return to child-like innocence, it invites us to understand how important it is to raise children immersed in the love-ethic Jesus teaches."

I'm so grateful that on this World Communion Sunday we are celebrating the meaningful and marvelous work of two very special women who continue to teach a love-ethic of Jesus to our children. Where would this church be without Theresa Helms and Cookie Stokes? Where would our children be without these amazing women? This is a church that ordains women as deacons and as ministers. This is a church where women are teachers and hold key places of leadership. This is a church where children are seen as equal and where we are intergenerational. This is a place that gives voice to the voiceless and value to the vulnerable. This is a place where the broken and the blessed come together at the Lord's Table and share the bread and the cup. This is the place...

In this difficult lectionary text for today, Jesus taught the disciples that God created everyone equal and that God's spirit is in every person, the broken and the blessed. And Jesus also taught us that when we welcome the "little ones," the vulnerable, we welcome him. In order to create a new family born out of the kingdom of God, we must realize Jesus in all of us. This new family, this community of the broken and the blessed is expansive, inclusive, and characterized by love and mutuality. Which means, this text shouldn't scare us or shock us anymore. This text should encourage us and enliven us. This text should reveal to us that women were given a voice because of Jesus' understanding of divorce, and that children were moved from the bottom of society and given a place of position. Jesus brought the vulnerable voices to the front of the choir.

So, rather than use texts like this one as weapons to reassert rigid patriarchal norms, we should be followers of an expansive ethic of Jesus, continuing along the expansive path of redemption, continuing the expansive work of the kingdom in our communities, and in our homes, and in our city, and in our nation. For if we listen to Jesus, we might just soften our hearts, hear with new ears, and be a true community for the broken and the blessed.

Amen.