

TOUGH TALK

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Mark 10:2-16

This has been a very challenging week to write a sermon. The gospel from Mark is on the touchy subject of what Jesus said about divorce and how that plays out in our modern world. Then we had the shootings at the community college in Oregon and my thoughts turned to Job. Job was written in part to tackle the problem of bad things happening to good people. However another headline event has sent me back to the Mark passage. Why because it starts out with the Pharisees testing Jesus, trying once again to trap him and this week we saw modern day Pharisees at work.

By this time in Mark the Pharisees have challenged Jesus on paying taxes in an effort to try to trap him. They have also questioned him about if a women is married to all seven brothers whose wife will she be in heaven. This is another set up for Jesus to try to get him in trouble with Herod among others.

The first thing to do is to look at the context and the setting that exists as Jesus answers this question. The question was a trap to be sure however it was a topic of debate at that time and there were various schools of thought. The important piece of the setting was that John the Baptist has been executed over his criticism of Herod's divorce of his wife and then marrying his brother's wife. So this question could be seen as ascertaining if Jesus was a supporter of John's criticism of Herod. So there is a political element to the question aside from the religious implication. The political reason was really at the root of the question. The Pharisees did not really want to hear his thoughts on divorce.

A Jewish man could divorce his wife by simply saying, "I divorce you" and giving the woman a writ of divorce. The hard-hearted part is that according to the Hillel school of thinking the divorce could be for any reason or no reason other than he wanted a different wife. One rabbi wrote that a man could divorce his wife if she burned dinner. It is also important to remember that for the majority of Jewish history, multiple wives were allowed and while not common in the time of Jesus, there was no prohibition. All the great figures of the bible from Abraham through David and other kings had multiple wives. Monogamous marriage was a relatively new idea.

Jesus is actually over ruling scripture and tradition in his teaching. The passage he quotes is

Deut. 24:1 ¶ Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about

her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house

In the Torah, only the man is allowed to get a divorce. This divorce then left the woman in a very dangerous position. Please remember women were property at that time and had no rights. Jesus gives the woman an equal right to divorce a husband in this passage. Now they got more than they bargained for when he then prohibits remarriage. Jesus sets a high standard for marriage in the ancient world and for us today. Jesus however is talking about how things would be in the kingdom.

I wonder though, would Jesus condemn a couple to stay in an abusive marriage? Would Jesus condemn a person to never have the opportunity to be in a loving relationship again? I doubt it. What Jesus was speaking against was a very casual attitude towards divorce held by some in that time period. This was an issue that put women in a vulnerable even dangerous position. I sincerely doubt that this is a once and final judgment on the subject.

So what was the event in the news that sent me back to looking at this passage. It was what seemed to me a move by some modern day Pharisees to embarrass a great person and gain publicity for a cause they think is written in stone in scripture. This event was the revelation that Pope Francis had given Kim Davis the Kentucky Clerk of Courts an audience. I watched with interest the angst this seemed to cause, but knowing a little about the Catholic church I went online to the National Catholic Reporter and quickly found speculation there that some conservative bishops had set this up. Then it turned out she was just one of many in the room and just briefly met the Pope who probably had no idea who she was. The archbishop responsible was fired .

I fear that Kim Davis is in some respects a modern day Pharisee. She knows her bible at least those parts she wants to acknowledge and talk about. She can quote every scripture about how God hates LGBT people. But what may I ask does she do with today's scripture? You see if she is going to go for a literal interpretation then she needs to read today's passage where Jesus makes his statement about divorce and look in the mirror. (BTW Jesus never said anything about LGBT issues) You may not know it but she is on her third marriage having divorced her first two husbands. She has a child from an affair with husband number 3 while she was married to husband number 1. These facts have been reporting in at least three national newspapers. I think she might want to ponder another saying of Jesus, "You who are without sin may cast the first stone."

You see this is the problem with proof texting, taking individual passages out of the bible and removing them from their context. You cannot demand that we take some passages literally and then skip over the ones that are inconvenient or might reflect badly on you. Either you follow good biblical exegesis, the

systematic analysis of the bible, or you have to take all of the Bible at face value. You cannot have it both ways.

The bible is a living document that still speaks to us today. The UCC campaign about God is still speaking makes an excellent point. God still speaks to us today, through scripture and through other ways. Remember we as Episcopalians work on the principal of Hooker's three-legged stool. The three legs are scripture, tradition and reason. This is what makes us different from just about any other faith.

The big question and the standard for judging is does our biblical interpretation bring the kingdom closer or does our interpretation move us farther from the kingdom. That is the essential question, at least from my standpoint. That is why I can draw the conclusion with this passage that I do. Does the same categorical teaching apply in our time that applied in the time of Christ?

Jesus however presents the ultimate corrective in his closing words of this passage. Once again we are called to embrace the children, all God's children. Any interpretation that sets those children outside our circle, outside of Christ's embrace must be questioned. So interpreting this passage literally in today's world does put a large segment of our population outside of God's kingdom and I believe that is wrong.

My interpretation may be 100% wrong, however there is one other hope and that is grace. If I believe nothing else I do believe that God loves us no matter what. God heals and forgives our sins. Nothing can separate us from the love of God as long as we continue to seek his forgiveness. More than any piece of biblical gymnastics I may do, I rest in the fact that God loves me and you all the same. Single, married, divorced, remarried, straight, gay, male or female it really does not matter for God loves everyone, no exceptions.