

Sunday October 7, 2018
Year B: Thanksgiving & World Wide Communion
Mark 10:2-16
“An Alternative Understanding – please!!”
Rev. Elise Feltrin
St. Andrews United Church, Bayfield

Mark 10:2-16 Good News Translation

Some Pharisees came to Jesus and tried to trap him. “Tell us,” they asked, “does our Law allow a man to divorce his wife?”

Jesus answered with a question, “What law did Moses give you?”

Their answer was, “Moses gave permission for a man to write a divorce notice and send his wife away.”

Jesus said to them, “Moses wrote this law for you because you are so hard to teach. But in the beginning, at the time of creation, ‘God made them male and female,’ as the scripture says. ‘And for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one.’ So they are no longer two, but one. No human being must separate, then, what God has joined together.”

When they went back into the house, the disciples asked Jesus about this matter. He said to them, “A man who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against his wife. In the same way, a woman who divorces her husband and marries another man commits adultery.”

Some people brought children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples scolded the people. When Jesus noticed this, he was angry and said to his disciples, “Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you that whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.” Then he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on each of them, and blessed them.

Ok – let’s just be completely honest and name it right up front; this is one of the most provocative and controversial passages in the Newer Testament – some might even call it offensive. When it pops up every three years in the lectionary cycle, most preachers wouldn’t touch it with a ten foot pole – for good reason, because it’s chock full of dangerous landmines. Supposedly holy words of wisdom, that have been used to manipulate and hurt others; contextual phrases that have been mis-quoted with literal authority to control people and pass judgment. Ancient ideas that some say should be dismissed as ‘outrageously outdated and simply irrelevant.’

Full disclosure: I’m divorced.

And I completely support loving same-sex partnerships.

So of course my hackles rise and I wince when I come across this text – condemning divorce while exalting the ideal of heterosexualism.

I immediately try to avoid it – let’s just skip the Gospel this week and focus instead on the Epistle reading!

But a wise mentor once told me, the scripture story that makes you cringe, is the one you most need to examine.

Because lurking somewhere beneath the offensive surface, there must be Good News...please!

If only we can find it!

Thankfully, or perhaps serendipitously, we have been exploring the epistle readings for the past few weeks – and have continually heard from James, about the importance of loving community.

....How faithful and loving human relationships serve to nurture and uphold each other, in ways that allow for the well-being, the healing and the wholeness of those involved.

What if we were to read this text from Mark's gospel, listening for the way in which Jesus uplifts these kind of healthy relationships? That care for the vulnerable, and allow for joy and love to flourish?

And to do that, it's best to start at the end rather than the beginning.

Although it may seem a strange add-on to this story about the legality of divorce, it's no coincidence that this text ends with the verses about welcoming children.

In the ancient imperial society of Jesus' day, children were the bottom rung of the social ladder.

They had zero rights or privileges. They were susceptible to the oppressive power of the authorities. They were entirely defenseless and completely dependent.

And yet, Jesus proclaims children as the first heirs to God's kin-dom.

Implying, that when we are in solidarity with the most innocent and vulnerable, when we embrace the weak and welcome the marginalized, God's realm draws near.

The idea that God's disruptive and offensive Spirit, overturns patriarchal norms and Empirical standards and elevates those who are subjugated and powerless.

Affirming, that the weak shall inherit God's kin-dom!

This is not only Good News, it is revolutionary news!

So we're off to a good start. Now let's back up a bit more, to the topic of divorce....

Again, in ancient times, a divorced woman would be the equivalent of an outcast; she would be without support or resources – without rights, without respect.

As with widows and children – she was bumped to the absolute bottom of the social heap.

By Jewish Law, divorce was permissible – all a man had to do was write a decree stating his reason, and the marriage was over. And the reasons could be pretty trivial – like being unhappy with what she made for dinner.

But what is permissible by Law, is very different from what is intended by God.

So when Jesus announces that a man who divorces his wife and re-marries, commits adultery against his wife, **IN THE SAME WAY**, a woman who divorces her husband and marries another man commits adultery – let's not get hung up on the re-marrying and committing adultery part.

'**IN THE SAME WAY**' are the words that matter here. This is a radical announcement by Jesus – empowering women. And saying that men are no longer allowed to casually toss aside their spouses as chattel to be discarded.

Instead, men **and** women, are equally entitled to end relationships; particularly when those relationships are based on abuse and neglect, rather than mutual respect and concern.

In answering the Pharisees question about divorce – a question posed, (let's not forget as it says right in the opening verse), in order to 'trap' Jesus, **Jesus is announcing a new era of equal partnerships.**

As he very often does with great skill and wit, Jesus turns the entrapment question back to the questioner – knowing very well that they already know the answer.

The Pharisees are well-versed in scripture, they know the Law – and yet they have inquired of Jesus “Does our Law allow a man to divorce his wife?”

“What Law did Moses give you?” Jesus retorts – and then adeptly switches this conversation from one about rigid rules and legality based on what humans decree, to a discussion about what God intends for humanity.

Jesus, well-versed in scripture himself, reaches all the way back to the story of Genesis to remind them that rooted in Creation itself, is God's desire for union. That God's original objective is for complete wholeness and for community.

For healthy and grace-filled relationships.

In lifting up God's original intention for all Creation, Jesus affirms it as one that supersedes all human-made Law. Human law is always crafted in response to human sin.

But human law is also always trumped by God's Divine purpose.

Just yesterday, I married a young couple in this church – and as with all weddings I perform, their vows were emotionally filled with sincere declarations of hope, and promises for unconditional love.

Nobody ever enters into marriage with the intention of getting divorced. Divorce is always sad, often tragic, and disrupts untold lives.

God certainly does not intend for us to get divorced.

But neither does God intend for any of us to live in violent, or neglectful or deeply unfulfilling relationships.

The Good News proclaimed by Jesus, in this offensive, troubling and often misunderstood passage, is that when we strive for relationships based on equality and compassion, relationships that uphold each other....

Relationships that mutually offer dignity and fulfillment....

... that share each other's burdens and are rooted in kindness and compassion - in these relationships we too might catch a glimpse of God's kin-dom, breaking into our lives, and into the lives of those whom we love. And this is indeed Good News!

On this Thanksgiving weekend, let's remember to not just be thankful for what is **on** our table, but also for all those **around** our table with whom we share relationships that are life-giving, and joy-filled.

Thanks be to God,
Amen.