

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 22
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
October 3, 2021
Genesis 2:18-24
Psalm 8
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

Marriages of Opposites

When my oldest niece, Rachel, was about three years old, she memorized the last verses of our gospel passage today from the New International Version of the Bible.

She would recite verses 13 and 14 with such feeling; her whole small body would be involved as she rendered them, saying: “¹³People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴When Jesus saw this, he was indignant.”

I'm not sure if at that point if Rachel knew exactly what the words *rebuked* and *indignant* meant, but she certainly had a sense of them in this context. She definitely understood that Jesus was not pleased to see his disciples turning children away. And she definitely understood that Jesus wanted children to come to him.

She loved that the story ended with Jesus taking children up into his arms and blessing them.

Let the little children come to me, Jesus says. Don't stop them. To them belongs God's great commonwealth. Only those who embrace God's invitation the way they do will find their way into God's inbreaking realm.

In the case of the last few verses of this passage, the New International Version and the New Revised Standard Version that we use in public worship are very similar in the words and phrasing they use to render this story of Jesus and the children.

Contrast these versions with the King James Version for verses 13 and 14:

“¹³ And they brought young children to him, that he should touch them: and his disciples rebuked those that brought them.” So far so good, but then...

¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.

“*Suffer* the little children to come unto me.” It's a very different translation, isn't it? It's from a different and much older register and genre of English. And if as readers we don't know that “suffer” in this case means “bear,” as in carry or bring, we can wind up in a very different place of understanding.

As a college student spending a summer abroad, I once heard with my own ears a young adult teaching this passage to a group of children under twelve years of age. The lesson was taken from the King James Version. The teacher said to the children gathered around him, “Jesus says that we must make you suffer in order to bring you to him. We must discipline you in order to make you to come to him.”

Kind of a different message, wouldn't you say? It's a very different teaching.

It's said that every translation is also an interpretation. This much, I think, we can certainly affirm.

AND every reading of a particular passage of scripture is also a kind of interpretation. And how we use or wield or teach scripture, whatever translation or version we are using, is important.

Thankfully, in my lifetime, I've only had that one experience of hearing verses 13 and 14 of Mark chapter 10 so misinterpreted, mishandled, and mistaught.

As for the earlier verses of our gospel passage today, however, verses 2 through 12 of Mark chapter 10...well, that's a different story.

Verses 2 through 12 of our gospel text today have been used to bash and shame people for a very long time. They have been used for centuries to frighten and threaten people, especially women, into staying in marriages in which they found themselves trapped and sometimes very horribly abused.

These verses of Mark 10 have become favorites of proponents of so-called “biblical marriage” who use them as one of their proof texts that marriage should be between “one man and one woman.” Specifically, one man and one woman who have never had any other partners and should be married together for the entire remainder of their lives no matter what. No exceptions. End of story.

When some of these folks invoke the model of “biblical marriage,” some of the rest of us may find ourselves asking, “*Which* model of biblical marriage?” The model in which King Solomon has 700 wives and 300 concubines? The model in which Judah impregnates his daughter-in-law when he thinks she is a prostitute? The model in which women are always subservient to and ancillary to men in heteronormative relationships? The model that is in the reading from Genesis 2 today wherein Eve is created from Adam's rib?—a story, by the way, which is much younger than the first creation story of the first people in the first chapter of Genesis when the spirit of the living God creates both of them at the same instant from the dust of the earth.

So, “biblical marriage.” Hmm. Which model of biblical marriage?

The reality is that marriage as a concept, as a social structure, and as an institution in human life has varied dramatically across historical eras and cultures.

Marriage among elites of the Roman Empire was very different from marriage between peasants in first-century Palestine like Mary and Joseph.

Marriage in the United States or even in the colonies that would become the United States was very, very different in the 17th and 18th centuries than it is in the 21st century.

If you want to explore further how marriage has changed since ancient times and particularly how it has changed in the life of our country, I commend to you the work of Professor Stephanie Coontz (C-o-o-n-t-z) of Evergreen State University in Washington state.

If marriage has changed over the centuries across cultures, what does that mean? Does it mean that everyone everywhere stopped following God's guidelines on marriage and divorce? Or does it mean perhaps that we as the human family have learned new things as we have gone along under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and applied them to our common life, including our social structures? So that some of us who never would have been allowed to be married or have our partnerships considered marriages not so terribly long ago can now be married in the name of the Holy Trinity in the Episcopal Church.

We could spend a very long time parsing all these particulars about marriage and divorce. It might be more fruitful, though, to look at how our gospel passage today begins and go from there.

Today's gospel begins this way: Some Pharisees came to test Jesus.

Their question: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

Jesus replies, "What did Moses command you?" In good rabbinic fashion, Jesus answers a question with a question. He always seems to always know when people are trying to trip him up with phoney questions, when the question being asked isn't a sincere inquiry but is rather setting a trap.

The Pharisees were members of a relatively small but disproportionately influential group in first-century Judaism. As we examined a few weeks ago, they were kind of a religious sect within Judaism, kind of a political group, kind of a school of thought, and kind of a social movement. Most of the time as we encounter them in the gospels, the Pharisees have pre-determined answers for most of life's questions: it's either this or that. Jesus confounds them repeatedly because he has a wisdom that is beyond binary, this-or-that thinking. He doesn't think either/or; he thinks both/and.

If we move beyond binary thinking, beyond either/or, in interpreting this passage on marriage and divorce, what might it have to say to us today?

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This year in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary, we are in the gospel of Mark. As I've mentioned a number of times since beginning my tenure here at St Paul's on June 5, the gospel of Mark was composed by and for a community of first-century Jewish Christians who had been forced out of the synagogues and who were facing persecution by the Roman Empire.

They were a community whose principal driving question was, "How do we move through suffering?" What did this passage, this pericope, on marriage and divorce hold for them?

When they with their community were reciting together, praying together, chanting together this Gospel of Mark by heart, knowing at any moment the authorities might come for them, what might this notion of staying in a marriage and refusing to divorce mean for them?

When we are in uncomfortable circumstances, trying times, hard seasons, we often look for a way to move as quickly as possible to resolve the tension, to relieve the discomfort. If we can't find a resolution fast enough, we tend to find ways to numb out so that we don't have to feel the discomfort.

We are drawn to clear-cut answers and clear decisions. Western cultures since the Enlightenment have predisposed us to think and act like this, in an either-or binary mode.

Yet for people like the community who composed Mark and for us, this passage is an invitation to hold in tension things which seem to be dramatically, impossibly, uncomfortably opposed to one another.

Our lives and our world are full of such seeming opposites: light and dark, up and down, day and night, old and new, pain and pleasure, easy and difficult, contraction and expansion, freedom and constraint, and many more.

We live in the midst of these opposed pairs, these qualities and realities, these pairs of opposites. We cannot avoid them in this life.

If we will stay on the path of increasing wisdom as we follow Jesus, if we will live with and in the dynamic tensions of these opposites, we will often find new insights and new understandings. We may even be able to imagine different possibilities and outcomes and live into them.

These learnings may not come quickly, but if we stay on the path and in the process and in the creative tension between the opposites, they will come as we stay in the marriages of opposites, refusing to divorce them from one another. Can we have day without night? Can we have new without old?

If we hurry to resolve tensions and apparent contradictions, we will often miss the very richest opportunities for spiritual growth and learning.

None of these pairs of opposites is held in static balance, nor is maintaining them in a static balance the goal. Rather, we move around within in them, tacking back and forth, like good sailors responding to changing winds, as we find our way. Night becomes day becomes night. Old becomes new becomes old. Freedom becomes constraint becomes freedom. And so on.

In a certain way, these are marriages between each of these pairs of seeming opposites. And to recognize this and live through and with the tensions is to move beyond binary, either/or approaches and engage, like Jesus, in approaches that are both/and, that are more capacious and spacious, that make space for new understandings.

The symbol of the cross gives us a way to think about this. The cross itself is a marriage of opposites. One axis points in one direction, vertically, and the other axis points in the exact opposite direction, horizontally.

The tension, the creative tension, between the opposites creates the cross, one of our oldest and most enduring symbols across cultures and certainly in our own tradition of Christianity. Did you know it was centuries before Christians began to depict Jesus on the cross? It was the power of the cross, this symbol of a cruciform life where everything is joined in the center, that is the symbol of our tradition from its earliest time.

And to live a life in which marriages of opposites are recognized rather than avoided, appreciated rather than resisted, even celebrated is to live a cruciform life. A life of meaning and purpose. A life with value that values other lives. A life that bears spiritual fruit.

In a certain sense, the fruits of such a life are the spiritual children of these marriages of opposites. We know these children by familiar names, including “the fruits of the Spirit”: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

And in this way, the two parts of our gospel passage today, marriage and divorce and the welcoming and blessing of children come together.

Jesus invites us to the living of a cruciform life in which these fruits, these children are produced in us and in which we recognize ourselves and each other as the children at the end of today’s gospel passage: God’s beloved children, created in God’s image, children who are recognized, welcomed, received, and blessed.