

Sermon : Jesus' compassion for the disadvantaged and weak

We've been preaching around the theme of koinonia fellowship for the last while and on the whole we have been referring to the readings for the day, drawn from the New Zealand lectionary. The letter of James and the Gospel of Mark have had much to say directly about how we are to relate in the body of Christ, how to be in fellowship with God and each other.

The readings we use each Sunday are mostly determined by what is called the Revised Common Lectionary – this list used by mainline denominations around the world covers the whole Bible in 3 years. And so today we have, in this gospel reading from Mark, Jesus teaching about Marriage and Divorce. So that is what I'd like to open up to you today. What was Jesus saying here, and why did he take the position he did in their context and what does it mean for us today and how does it relate more broadly to our being in fellowship?

This is in many ways a difficult passage for me to preach on – mainly because divorce is such a painful thing. I am sure that there are few people in today's society that have not been touched in some way by a painful relationship breakup in their family or their own life, or among their friends or acquaintances. There's just no way around its challenges, its heartache, and its ramifications for and ripple effects on all of the relationships involved.

So let's begin with what the passage says. The Pharisees approached Jesus with a question that is, as usual, out to test him. They were constantly trying to catch him out or put him in a box that they could then use to dismiss what he said or limit his impact – just like those in political power do now. He's on that side so therefore must really think such and such and none of our side need to take any more notice of him!

The issue behind their question was that there were two schools among the Pharisees and scholars of the law at that time which had different interpretations of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which permitted a man to divorce

his wife if he found something objectionable about her. Note first that this presupposes a man's point of view only. Then one school thought this allowed divorce for any reason and the other party thought that divorce was only allowed in the case of adultery. Jesus shows no interest in being drawn into that debate and nor does he assume that it is only the husband who has any say in the matter.

So instead of taking sides in their debate about divorce he uses their 'test' to confront them with their misunderstanding of scripture. He shows that they misunderstood God's design for marriage and misuse scripture and their traditions of interpretation to justify their errors. Firstly he gets them to state the law they were concerned with more fully. The Pharisees neglect to mention a key piece of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which requires a husband to give the certificate of divorce to his ex-wife. Such a document might provide a divorced woman with a defense against rumor and slander. For a majority of women in that culture, survival depended upon being a member of a household. A woman, perhaps with children, without a husband and without a means of explaining why she was unmarried, could be exposed to great risk. The law's provision about the certificate seeks to lessen that risk, but apparently the Pharisees find that detail not worth noting. Jesus however is concerned that the woman in the situation is protected.

Jesus turns the conversation with the Pharisees away from the legal foundation for divorce to God's design for marriage. That is, he dismisses the law (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) as a concession to human weakness and offers a different perspective rooted in creation with his quote from Genesis (Genesis 1:27; 2:24). 'But at the beginning of creation God "made them male and female". "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."' His brief argument describes marriage as a strong and (literally) unifying bond between two people. It is part of the order of creation and a reflection of the very image of God himself. And, as we have been exploring these last few weeks, this image of God is of the persons of the Trinity in deep fellowship with one another. Marriage is, one could say,

the closest embodiment we have of the fellowship we are all invited into in Christ.

It is because Jesus sees marriage in such a way that he speaks against divorce as he does. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. In the Biblical view marriage occurs with the sexual union but it is more than this. The physical action is part of the relational bond that is created in marriage as God intends it to be. That relational bond is so strong that it is worked out in the two becoming one. It is not a religious or legal ceremony that makes a marriage. As God joins the man and wife together in this way it is against God's way for them to separate. Jesus explains that divorce contravenes God's design as expressed in Genesis 1-2.

Later with his disciples, he reveals more specifics, saying that a person who initiates a divorce to marry another person commits adultery. Remember here - according to God's design, marriage occurs, not with a legal or religious ceremony but with the physical and relational union, so this covers not only someone who seeks divorce but also one who even just breaks the relationship to have an affair or a physical relationship. In all this, Jesus radicalizes the demands of scripture to a point perhaps far beyond where any Pharisee would have taken it.

We need a little more cultural background to understand why he is saying this. Marriage in the ancient world, at least among the vast majority of social strata, was primarily a means of ensuring families' economic stability and social privileges (by creating both offspring and inter-family alliances). A woman's sexuality was essentially the property of her father, then of her husband. By speaking of a man committing adultery *against a woman* (and not against her father or her past or present husband), Jesus implies that adultery involves more than violating the property rights of another man. It concerns accountability to a partner. Jesus gives women a place of greater equality in the marriage relationship, not seeing them as passive objects. He even says that a woman would be just as guilty if she did the same.

Note too, when Jesus talks with his disciples, he says nothing about the rejected partner in a divorce and his or her remarriage. He seems to be speaking specifically against those who leave their partners for others. His point is that divorce does not offer a legal loophole to justify subsequent adultery. That is, his strongest words are against those who initiate divorce as a means to get something else, sacrificing a spouse to satisfy one's desires or ambitions. It's the faithful partner that is harmed when his or her spouse divorces in order to marry someone else. Committing adultery is not an abstract, moral sin. It is a real, hurtful action against one's God-joined partner. This was countercultural, though perhaps more obvious to us.

All that Jesus is saying here shows Jesus to be concerned particularly with protecting the women of his time from men who use divorce for their own benefit and so imperil women and, for that matter, their children. This is hardly the only place where Jesus says that God's design means to provide wholeness and protection for those who are vulnerable. It is no coincidence that Mark next tells a story about Jesus blessing children (10:13-15). Children in the ancient world had few rights and essentially no social status. Therefore the disciples obstruct people who bring children to Jesus. Jesus blesses them, not because they conjure sweet images of innocence, but because he has concern for the vulnerable and scorned, for those ripe for exploitation. He welcomes, embraces, and lays his hands upon them and blesses them. The action of laying hands on someone often is associated with healing too, restoring to wholeness or rightness.

If marriage is what Jesus says it is, then we understand better why failed marriages bring such pain to couples, extended families, and communities. Jesus brings into view the hurt and brokenness that come, even when a divorce appears to be the best among all available options. Jesus' special concern for children reminds us that they are often particularly hurt when parents divorce.

Jesus' concern is for those who are weak and vulnerable, those who are most disadvantaged. Yes he upholds God's intention that marriage be for life. But he also recognizes that when God's intentions are not fulfilled whether in marriage or any other way in which we fail to keep to his best plan for the way to live, then people will be hurt. This applies to our wider fellowship relationships too. Like the men of Jesus time we can use the law to govern relationships to our advantage and cause hurt to the most disadvantaged and weak, or we can choose, like Jesus, to use our strength for righteousness/justice and blessing for those who could most easily be hurt.

In his compassion Jesus cares most for those who are disproportionately hurt, who are most vulnerable. And his behavior towards those is one of welcome, embrace, healing and blessing.

So as we consider the pain of broken relationships in particular, let's also come to him in prayer for healing and restoration. Let us pray that we and all those with the advantages of strength, opportunity, power, may seek justice and healing for those who are considered the least, who are exploited and hurt in our broken world, church and lives.