

Leveling the Playing-Field

[Text - Mark 10:2-16]

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I must admit that Jesus' teaching about *divorce* not only sound extremely strict, but it also seems rather unreasonable. "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." But here's the interesting thing about Jesus' teaching: the Torah [the Hebrew Book of Law] only mentions divorce one time. Deuteronomy chapter 24:1 says, "When a man enters into marriage with a woman, and she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house." [Sorry about that, ladies, but those are the rules of a "Biblical Marriage"!]

Now one might wonder, "Why, then, would Jesus talk about a woman divorcing her husband?" That's because in Biblical times [and for centuries to follow] marriage was essentially a contract made between *men*. That's right! That "Biblical Marriage" that my fundamentalist friends so strongly want to defend, is actually about the relationship between two *men* - the groom, and the woman's father! The woman herself was simply a piece of chattel or property with which to barter. So *marriage* was something that men imposed on women, whether they liked it or not. And so was divorce! The only time a woman would divorce her husband, was when her father decided that there was a better deal to be arranged - not for her sake, but for his.

When Jesus is asked, "Is it *lawful* for a man to divorce his wife?" he replies, 'Yes! And you know exactly what Moses commanded.' But then, Jesus nullifies that text from Deuteronomy and says, 'But this is not what Holy One intended! Moses only allowed divorce in the first place because of *your* hardness of heart.' In other words, Jesus contends that we can't assume that just because something is found in Scripture, that it expresses a Divine purpose or intent! Some Bible verses express nothing more than the cultural bigotry, the scientific ignorance, or the "hardness of heart" of the men who wrote those passages.

In this case, when Jesus talks about "*your* hardness of heart," he's talking to a specific group of people - the Pharisees - men who see themselves as

religious know-it-all's, and who vehemently try to make sure that everybody else follows *their* rigid religious rules. The Torah was written by men; and it's men who subsequently make all the rules about marriage. In Jesus' day, men were the important people, while women and children were insignificant peons. Their ideas and opinions, voices and personal stories just didn't matter. [Which reminds me of a recent U.S. Senate Judiciary hearing.] Perhaps that's why Jesus' confrontation with those cold, hard-hearted Pharisees, is immediately followed by his warm embracing of the children - to contrast those power-driven, hard-hearted men; with those vulnerable, open-hearted children.

Jesus understands that much of the Torah simply reinforces the social, political, and religious power that men have over women. So Jesus rejects that, in order to level the playing field. And he justifies his rejecting of those male-privileging Scriptures, by using Scripture itself - reminding us that the Divine Desire is not to sanction hardness of heart, but to hold people together in a unifying love. Citing the Book of Genesis, Jesus notes that when two lives become One, it is a beautiful, Divine gift. And it's not something that men with money or power can simply discard or destroy, just because they want a younger model or a better financial deal.

Now, a problem can arise, when people try to turn Jesus' own statement about divorce into yet another excuse for hard-hearted cruelty. In this context, Jesus is raising-up the ideal goal of a lifelong marriage, while shutting-down the male-controlled institution of divorce. He's not establishing a rigid new law - that no one can ever get divorced; or that if they do, they cannot remarry. Rather, he is showing us that Holy Scripture *isn't* a collection of unyielding laws that can be used to protect the powerful and the abusive! At its core, Holy Scripture is a collection of remarkable insights into the Divine compassion and grace which is directed toward society's most vulnerable members. Personally, I find it incomprehensible and inconsistent that the Holy One would condemn a person to spend her or his entire life with an abusive spouse, or in a toxic relationship; or that if such a person later did find a loving, supportive partner, that the Divine Source of this vast Universe would somehow be offended if they got remarried. Yet there are still some hard-hearted Christians today who misuse Jesus' teaching, to insist that this is so.

It is appropriate to ask the question, "What do the Scriptures say about divorce?" - but I think that's the wrong question. The better question is,

“What is the Holy One’s desire concerning marriage?” It seems to me that the Divine Desire, and the deep desire of just about anyone who gets married, is that their love and commitment will last forever! When *any* two people join together as One - physically, emotionally, spiritually - it’s a terribly sad and painful thing for that Oneness to be torn-apart. But it can and it does happen. Usually, the tearing-apart of the relationship takes place over an long period of time. The divorce papers are merely the death certificate - the official acknowledgment of that sad and painful ending.

The fact is, people are not perfect; that’s why we need laws - even divorce laws. But they must be laws that protect all parties, especially the most vulnerable ones! And those who go through the trauma of a divorce, certainly don’t need the judgment or condemnation of others. What they need, is compassion and support, as they seek to move forward with their lives.

I think the most important question that this morning’s New Testament reading raises is this: How do you and I decide which Scriptures to embrace, and which ones to reject? I believe the answer can be drawn from that reading itself. When a Scripture text simply reinforces our own prejudices, hatreds, and hardness of heart, it’s probably harmful for us - and for others; therefore we should reject it. On the other hand, when a Scripture forces our hearts to open-up, making them more understanding, compassionate and caring, it’s probably authentic and reliable. *Those* are the Scriptures you and I can spend a lifetime exploring and absorbing, contemplating and following. Those are the Scriptures that will lead us to Divine Wisdom and Truth.