

When the Answer is Love...

For Berkeley Chinese Community Church

October 7, 2018 • 20th Sunday after Pentecost/World Communion • 11 am

Mark 10:2-16

² Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' ³He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' ⁴They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' ⁵But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." ⁷"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

¹⁰ Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

¹³ People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.



Jesus was all about love - that's his bottom line –

And if we think about all the stories about Jesus' healing people and eating with sinners... Isn't that about sharing God's love?

Isn't that demonstrating that God's love is for all – that no one is outside God's embrace? That everyone is accepted in God's family in a society that followed rules about who to exclude? The world that Jesus was born into, grew up in and lived in was all about who gets to enter the temple...who is accepted....who is "clean" and worthy of being recognized as a person. Remember in bible times – women weren't people – they were possessions...back then, people with disabilities or who were sick were "unclean" and deemed unworthy of the rights and privileges of being part of the community. Remember the Jesus' miracles? Remember the man who was blind? Remember the hemorrhaging woman? Remember the lepers?

In Bible times...people who were of a different ethnicities were shunned. Remember the Samaritans? Remember the Syrophenician women?

Jesus was all about love – about including those who have been excluded....all those Jesus stories was yes, about healing the individuals, but it was waaay more - they cut to the core of traditions practiced for generations – it was a questioning about the then norm of excluding folks by following all the rules and laws about who is “in” and who is “out.”



So – let’s talk about today’s passage - the question that the pharisees challenged him with by asking about divorce....they were interested in tripping him up – this guy who was trying to undo all that they were teaching and practicing.

My friend and colleague, Rev. Dr. Dan De Leon asks...

“What if I told you that this reading from Mark’s gospel that mentions divorce is actually a lesson about inclusiveness? What if I told you that today’s reading that mentions adultery is actually talking about restorative justice?”

You see, when the Pharisees corner Jesus and ask him about divorce, the answer is *supposed* to be about people excluding one another...about one being excluded by the other, and about punitive justice being the grounds for that exclusiveness. That may be an easy answer, but for Jesus, that is never the answer. For Jesus, the answer is always love. And love practices restorative justice...love strives for the inclusiveness of communion. So here an astute but innocent bystander might say to the Pharisees, “If love is the answer, you’re going to have to rephrase the question!”

“Is it lawful for a man to
divorce his wife?”

Mark 10: 2, Standard Revised Version

OK – about divorce - The Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

So let’s do a little research about this question to be sure we have the question right...

“Is it lawful for a man to
divorce his wife?”

Mark 10: 2, Standard Revised Version

“Is it lawful for a man to put
away his wife?”

Mark 10: 2, King James Version

Did you know that in The King James Version of the Bible, question that Pharisees asked is, ‘Is

it lawful for a man to put away his wife?”

Say what? Why doesn't it say 'divorce'?

Well...remember that the New Testament was translated from the Greek and the Greek word from which 'put away' is translated is *apolouo*, and *apolouo* means “to put away, to send away, or to dismiss.” Imagine that!

So, literally, the Pharisees aren't asking about divorce at all, at least not the kind of divorce that we know now. Whoa! This is an aha! Moment Just think – this assumption that “put away” actually means “divorce” as informed by this text, has led to centuries of the Christian Church punishing divorced people by excluding them, literally and figuratively, from the table of communion.

We have some rephrasing, and rethinking, to do. If love is the answer, the ancient translators of our Holy Scriptures will need to rephrase the question!

But *what if* the Pharisees are talking about divorce? After all, the translation of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible that we're reading today **does** say that word.

So, Let's go with that possibility...

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

Mark 10: 2, Standard Revised Version

Well – I remember reading somewhere that



David Lose, the President of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia says, “We need to recognize that divorce in the first century was not at all the same phenomenon as it is in the 21st century.”

DIVORCE IN ANCIENT TIMES:

- a woman didn't divorce a man; only a man could divorce a woman, and a man could do so for any reason.

He's right – remember - in ancient times, a woman didn't divorce a man; only a man could divorce a woman, and a man could do so for any reason.

In Deuteronomy 24, we read "...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."

DIVORCE IN ANCIENT TIMES:

- a woman didn't divorce a man; only a man could divorce a woman, and a man could do so for any reason.
- was all about possessions and ownership...women were property.

Divorce in antiquity was all about possessions. It was all about property and ownership. And women, in that male-dominated society, were property. Divorce in ancient times never hurt a man, but it always left women destitute, without property and without options, forced to beg or go into prostitution.

So, when the Pharisees confront Jesus, it seems to me that Jesus is trying to put an end to this exclusionary practice. Listen up...

DIVORCE IN ANCIENT TIMES:

- a woman didn't divorce a man; only a man could divorce a woman, and a man could do so for any reason.
- was all about possessions and ownership...women were property.

The Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce, and he answers them about marriage. Let's rephrase the question, gentlemen!

For another thing, if you're going to talk about marriage in that ancient context, you've got to talk about adultery, too. Back then, divorce could only be carried out by a man, and adultery could only be committed **against** a man.

Adultery was an offense to a man's family lineage. It was an affront to a man's property and the continuance of his undefiled family name. That's all. Consequently, divorce was meant merely to protect a **man's** property and family name. That was the law. That has nothing to do with our 21st century Western World understanding of divorce!

So, when Jesus' responds to the Pharisees, he's responding to that ancient practice, not ours. And, and Jesus often does, he flips that exclusionary, punitive, non-love based practice on its head.

Jesus dares to say that a man divorcing his wife and marrying another is *adulterous* on the *man's* part.

Jesus is using adultery as a way toward restorative justice for past legal practices that caused women to be excluded.



And Jesus' response to that legalistic exclusion was to say to this patriarchal society, "No, by putting her away and marrying another woman, *you're* the one committing adultery; and by committing adultery, **you're** the one sinning against her.

By dismissing her, by casting her out to the margins of nothingness for your own benefit, *you're* sinning against her; because you know what this woman, this wife, is **not** your property, she is a person who deserves your respect, because she is fearfully and wonderfully made by the God who loves us all."

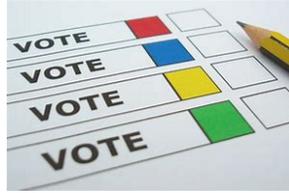
This is the same Jesus who is invited into the home of Simon the Pharisee, and when Simon and his male friends try to exclude a nameless woman in this scene by calling her a sinner, Jesus says, "Hang on. Do you see this woman?" Do you see her?

I believe that the lesson for us, one of many that we can learn from today's text, is that any practice which excludes someone because of who he or she is and removes them from communion is sinful. It is remembering Jesus' words, Do you see this woman? Do you see this person? Who are we excluding in our present day by being complicit to certain laws and doctrines and societal mores and ethics that are passively accepted?

Here's the bottom line: When the Pharisees ask Jesus whether it's lawful for a man to put away his wife, they're testing him. They don't really want an answer about how to look at things in a healthier way. They just want Jesus to mess up. It's a smear campaign. The Sadducees do the same thing to Jesus when they corner him and ask him about what happens in heaven if a woman marries a man in this lifetime, and he dies, and she remarries—who will her husband be in the afterlife. All their questions about divorce and marriage are meant to trip up Jesus, and to preserve the exclusionary, punitive practices of their day. And every time Jesus is tested, his response seems to say, "Think about what you're asking and rephrase the question. Love is the answer....so let's talk about **inclusion** and **restorative justice** in everything we ask."

So what does all this have to do with us today? We're not living in Ancient Times with the Pharisees that stand guard to be sure nothing changes....or are we?

Today Jesus might be saying to those who would test him with trick questions, "What I heard you say was, 'Is it lawful for a man to put away his spouse?' but I think what you meant to ask was, 'Is it lawful for someone to use the powers granted to them by society to exclude someone else, to cast them out from the circle of opportunity, to dismiss them from the gifts of community and communion and to banish them to the margins? ...Because if those things are lawful, you don't need to be questioning me...you need to be questioning your laws."



So – friends – are there laws we need to be questioning? We have an election coming up in about a month. We are blessed – we, the people of these United States of America, have the power to question our laws – we can vote the laws “in” that would follow our Jesus’ way of love...and we can vote “out” the laws that establish exclusionary practices! So – remember to vote!



Today our Friend Jesus might be saying, “If you’re asking me whether it’s acceptable for a panel of men to interrupt and talk over a woman before she has the chance to speak her whole story, then you don’t need to be questioning me; you need to be questioning the mores of your society that seems to still be living in the time of Moses.”



WE can remind ourselves we are to follow the ways of Jesus’ love – we can help empower our women and our women yet-to-be in our midst – we can encourage them to find their voice and place in our families, in our communities, in our world. We can retrain our men and men yet-to-be to value all people, to value and honor the voices of all.



Today our Teacher Christ might be saying, “If you’re asking me whether it’s just for any person to legally own guns and use those guns to go and seek out and kill people whatever the reason, you might want to rephrase the question and ask yourselves instead of me, ‘Why do our ethics reflect more of a love of guns than a love of people?’



because that question might point us to the only answer that matters: love." Shall we pray?



God of justice, mercy, and love, we recognize that the questions we ask about the state of things around us are limited by our fears and the blinders of self-interest. We thank you for sending Jesus into our midst to rephrase our questions. Challenge us, we pray, to ask questions of ourselves, our neighbors, and our world that promote the inclusion of all of your children's perspectives and even their very lives. As Jesus asked that the children be brought to him, may we strive for laws, doctrines, mores, and ethics that seek to bring all of your children from the margins of fear to the center of your fold where there is empowerment for all, safety for all, appreciation and respect for all, and room for all... Amen.