

God Cares For Everyone Mark 10:2-16

Summary

We live in a world where divorce is common. For many married couples, it seems like divorce is just a misstep away. We hear things like “falling out of love” and “the spark is gone” and the next thing you know, the couple is divorced. How should we look at marriage? What is God’s will in all of this? And what about the kids?

Tony and Susan had their wedding all planned out — a beautiful location for a perfect June outdoor ceremony. They had been dating about nine months and both families were happy about the wedding. About a month before the ceremony, Tony was eating breakfast with his coworkers one day and mentioned that he and Susan had had an argument the night before. After stating that it was all Susan’s fault, he said, “Well, if this marriage doesn’t work out, we can just get a divorce.” By September of that first year (three months after the wedding) they filed for divorce. It was over.

To be sure, we can all think of other couples who, despite early arguments and hard times, have celebrated many years together. We’re glad to know of couples who are in their marriage for the long haul, but divorce is so common in our society that a couple separating after only a few months together doesn’t really surprise us.

Obviously, the topic of divorce is not new, and neither is controversy surrounding divorce.

It’s not surprising that when the Pharisees wanted to “test” Jesus (and the implication is that they wanted to find fault with him), they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” And why not? No matter what he says, they thought, he’s going to upset some people. There was no downside for the Pharisees in asking the question ... or so they thought.

The question really was about the law regarding divorce. While there were competing ideas about the circumstances that would lead to divorce, most everyone agreed that divorce was legal. Again, the Pharisees were no doubt pleased with themselves for asking this question. Jesus would lose no matter how he answered.

But Jesus quickly turned the conversation away from the law. Going back to Moses, and then to Genesis, Jesus steered the topic to **God's** intent that our relationships be more than legal matters and that they help us to have a more abundant life. *That* was certainly not what the Pharisees wanted to talk about!

Jesus went beyond the law to the heart of the matter: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Note that the Pharisees say nothing after this. “Because of your hardness of heart ...,” Jesus had said to them about their answer that Moses allowed for divorce. Jesus saw through them to the condition of their hearts, and they had no answers for that.

The scene changes to a house where the disciples ask more questions about divorce. Jesus makes a pronouncement about divorce and adultery. While he states the law, he does not judge or condemn. What Jesus is doing is describing marriage as something that is both holy and serious. Ending it through divorce is not something to be taken lightly. You and I, and the church, should all promote healthy marriages. And you and I, and the church, must never forget the divorced persons. What's more, it is not our place to judge them.

On any given Sunday, in any church and in any location, there are many people who have been affected by divorce: divorce you've gone through yourself, divorce of your parents or other family members, divorce of one of your children or divorce of close friends — divorce touches just about everyone.

Divorce is a complex and painful reality of life. There are so many diverse circumstances that lead to divorce. Some people see it as an easy way out; it is not.

Others struggle and stay together for the sake of the kids; that's not necessarily easier, or better for the kids. For people caught in an abusive marriage, divorce may be a necessary means of survival. Some people are ultimately happier in divorce after a marriage that was anything but "holy" matrimony. Others are forever saddened by divorce. There are no easy answers here.

But we serve God who is with us in all of life — even when things do not turn out as we thought they would. We serve God who is with us in all of life — even when it feels like all hope is gone. We serve God who is with us in all of life — even when we cannot imagine how we'll get through this tough time. Even then, God is with us.

Jesus loves us in all our messiness as well as in our goodness. God understands that we are not perfect, and that we don't have to be perfect for God to love us. God accompanies us through every trial we face, constantly urging us toward fullness of life.

Our gospel lesson for this week does not end with the discussion on divorce. Rather, the scene switches to one of people "bringing little children to [Jesus] in order that he might touch them. ..." Why would people do that? Perhaps because they sensed in Jesus a heart for people who simply did not have much clout in the normal course of events.

Many had seen or heard about this Jesus who reached out to lepers and to the poor and to the blind and to beggars and to tax collectors and to adulterers and to the lonely and outcasts of society.

Add to that the fact that Jesus, a short time before in Capernaum, had asked his disciples what they were arguing about on the way there. “But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.” He then told them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” And he took a little child in his arms and said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Clearly, children have a special place in Jesus’ heart. So, what did the disciples do when people brought children to Jesus that day? They spoke sternly to them. We can imagine them saying, “He doesn’t have time for the likes of these! He’s an important man, you know.” At that, Jesus was indignant! He said, “Let the children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” I wonder if, upon hearing Jesus say this, the disciples remembered that previous incident when he took a child in his arms and told them that welcoming a child in his name was a way of welcoming *him*.

Jesus went even further this time when he said, “Truly, I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” Then “he took the children up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.”

Jesus does not comment on the normal relationship between parents and children but, rather, on the relationship between children and the kingdom of God. There is some debate on exactly what Jesus meant when he said, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

Does this mean we must receive the kingdom *when we are young*? Or does this mean we must receive the kingdom *as a little child receives the kingdom*? I think it's the second — that we receive the kingdom of God in the way that a little child receives the kingdom of God. And how is that? They and we receive the kingdom of God by virtue of *being children of God*.

Children are all different: big, little, tall, short, well-behaved, misbehaved, greedy, sharing. But Jesus calls them all. Those children Jesus held in his arms that day were people Jesus valued. They were (and we are) important to him.

All people matter to God. That's the connecting thread between these two scenes from Jesus' life. The vulnerable and the outcast and the helpless and the hurt — they all matter to God. So when Jesus speaks of divorce, he does so out of reverence for the vulnerable and the outcast and the helpless and the hurt, and because they all matter to God. He speaks out of love for *everyone* involved. Women in Jesus' day had no one standing up for them. Without so much as an explanation, a man could divorce his wife. Jesus let their voice be heard.

The same was (and is) true for the children. The same is true for anyone who is among the least, the lost and the last. Jesus loves and calls all his children — and their voice is heard. And so is ours.

So, what is clear in today's Gospel is that rules, laws, are not the final authority. We all live under the **grace of God**, whether we stay single, or marry, or divorce, whether we succeed or fail, ultimately, whether we live or die. It was hard for the pharisees to hear that, and it hard for us to hear it. The last word belongs to God, not the law. The last word is **grace**, not condemnation. The last word **is life**, not death. Believe it!! It's the only thing that matters. God's Grace gives us life, life here on earth and life forever with God. Amen.