

**Marriage**  
Pentecost 19, Year B  
Psalm 8:1-5, 9; Mark 10:2-16  
Rev. Stephanie Bekhor  
October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015

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Have you ever wondered if Jesus had a family of his own? It's hard to imagine, given how much he was "on the road", given the fact there's no direct reference in the Bible to a wife, yet nonetheless, many have speculated throughout the ages that he was married:

Last year "two authors came out with a book [*The Lost Gospel*] about a newly translated ancient text....suggest[ing] that Jesus was married."<sup>i</sup>

A decade earlier, Dan Brown proposed the same in his sensationalized 2003 novel, *The Da Vinci Code*.

In 1498 Leonardo Da Vinci pointed to the possibility by including in *The Last Supper* a woman at the table beside Jesus, likely Mary Magdalene, co-host of the meal.

And in the first century, writers of what has since been labeled by scholars as *The Dead Sea Scrolls* and *The Gnostic Gospels* claimed that Jesus was married.

The suggestion that Jesus may have been married is, by and large, scandalous to the Christian community. I wonder why; why couldn't Jesus have been married? Why couldn't his wife have accompanied him "on the road," as so many did?

But it's not the logistics that trip people up. It's not even, I dare say, because there's no direct mention of a spouse in the Bible. Jesus' marital status has garnered such interest and has stirred up such controversy because we are conflicted; we value marriage and its intimacy, but we are uncomfortable with, scandalized even, by the idea that Jesus could entered into this union, just as most of us have. We think it is somehow "beneath" him, that it somehow "lessens" him. I wonder: why is that?

Today's primary gospel reading illustrates our complex feelings and beliefs about marriage and its connection to religion and to God.

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A crowd has gathered around Jesus and while he is teaching them "some Pharisees come, and to test him ask, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'" (Mark 10:1-2).

If Jesus says yes, he contradicts their tradition's creation story; if he says no, he contradicts the Law of Moses.

Jesus doesn't take the bait: "What did Moses command you?" he asks (Mark 10:3), putting the onus on them to answer their own question.

"Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her," they say. And here is where the subject of marriage gets so messy.

The reference to a "certificate of dismissal" can be found in Deuteronomy 24, which begins:

Suppose 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; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife.

Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or the second man who married her dies; her first husband...is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord. (Deut 24:1-4)

*That* would be abhorrent to God?

Of the passage's many suppositions—that a spouse be treated as property, "kept" only if desirable, tossed out if not, and regarded as trash—the latter is perhaps the most abhorrent, yes, but not because a man would somehow be tarnished if he returned to his spouse; rather, if he regarded her as trash—not because of anything she did—but because of what he had done.

*That*, I like to hope, would be abhorrent to God. As a side note: this text refers to how a husband treats his wife, but it would be equality abhorrent if a woman treated her husband in this way.

Jesus criticizes them and rejects the law they have mentioned in two ways: (1) by not directly contradicting it, but by making clear it was given only because of their hardness of heart ((Mark 10:5); and, (2) by directly referring to an earlier story from their tradition: a creation story they would've known and been taught to respect:

From the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female. 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." (Genesis 2:24-25)

Suspend any questions or comments that pop into your head about gender and divorce—we'll get to those in a minute. For now, let's look at what Jesus is saying here: that the law to which the Pharisees refer is abhorrent because men *and women* are to honor one another; if the law were that a woman could treat her husband any way she pleased, Jesus would be equally harsh.

The Pharisees strike out, but the inning isn't over; Jesus' disciples step up to the plate to take a swing at the matter (Mark 10:10), though in fairness they ask him privately; their intent is not "to trip him up," as was the Pharisees', but to understand.

Jesus elaborates: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mark 11-12).

Now those questions we suspended earlier:

- (1) Must marriage be only between a man and a woman?
- (2) Is divorce permissible?

Jesus doesn't answer the first, nor does the second of our two creation stories; Jesus refers to the story *only* to address the Pharisees' question about divorce, not to stir up a debate about who can marry whom. (To interpret Jesus' message as a prohibition against any union other than heterosexual union is a logical fallacy; the former is not prohibited because the latter is celebrated. For example—albeit a gross oversimplification: if a person states that milk and cookies go together, he doesn't imply, by his statement, that *only* cookies go with milk.)

As to the second question: is divorce permissible? What a bag of worms.

Jesus claims that if *anyone* divorces his or her spouse and marries another, the one who has initiated the divorce has committed adultery against the original spouse.

That's bound to get people's hackles up. What if a man's wife has an affair and leaves her husband to be with her new love? Has she committed adultery against her husband? Yes. But is her husband also an adulterer because of *her* actions? At first glance, that's the way Jesus makes it sound. But this is not what he's saying; what he does appear to be communicating, though, is that if you divorce your spouse you're an adulterer.

That seems grossly unfair and so un-Jesus-like of Jesus. What if you're a domestic abuse victim and you find the courage to walk away and heal yourself, and then you marry another person who lifts you up rather than tears you down? Are you an adulterer?

It's important to differentiate what Jesus is and isn't saying; he isn't speaking about spousal abuse. We know of his deep compassion and love for the most vulnerable members of society, of his desire that all be healed: the abused and the abusers.

This message isn't about victims of spousal abuse. Nor is it fundamentally about adultery in the way we define adultery: as sexual infidelity.

It is an indictment of people who tear apart what has been "joined together by God." And while I don't believe that God "joins together" everyone who says "I do"—let's face it: some people should never have married each other in the first place—I do believe that, if you enter into marriage you better take it seriously. And if there's no good reason to separate, you better do everything in your power work on it. You don't walk away because someone else has caught your attention.

A family up the street from us is in turmoil for this reason. One of the spouses left the other and their three children and has not returned, even for visits with the kids. Even the dog seems lost; he makes his way down the alley and into our yard, seemingly looking for company. Liam calls him "barky dog" because he's often barking, seemingly rattled.

Jesus' words are understandably harsh; they are also are "good news."

First, Jesus implies that men and women have equal standing. Though Jesus doesn't promote divorce, in saying that women can *initiate* it, he accords women power denied to them by the prevailing culture.

Second, Jesus advocates commitment to and respect for the marriage bond. You don't just write up a "certificate of dismissal" and walk away or trade in your spouse for another as though you he or she were a car you're tired of.

And third, Jesus invites us, by his previous and subsequent teachings about children, to consider how our actions—and this is putting it mildly—affect "the little ones."

Jesus has already instructed the disciples to welcome children in his name (Mark 9:37); the Gospel of Mark returns to this theme after Jesus' discourse on marriage and divorce to draw our attention to the most vulnerable among: "People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, [SLIDE #6] "Let the little children come to me" (Mark 10:13).

Perhaps statements such as these have led people to wonder whether Jesus had not only married but had had children. Perhaps he understood on a personal level the joy of being a husband and a father. Regardless, Jesus is deeply concerned about how we treat our spouses, if we're married, and how we treat children in general.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. *Jesus never just stops there.*

He goes on to tell us that, in addition to honoring our spouses and to welcoming children, we must be willing to humble ourselves and receive the kingdom of heaven as a little child: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:15).

Here Mark comes full circle: from the argument between the disciples, recorded in chapter nine, about whom is the greatest among them—and their underlying concern about who will get to sit at Jesus' right hand in the Kingdom of Heaven—to Jesus' rebuke in chapter ten: if you want to enter the Kingdom of God you must receive it as one who has nothing—as a vulnerable child—not jockey for it, as though you could somehow earn it.

Remember Evangelist Billy Graham's words in last's week's sermon? "I am not going to Heaven because I have preached to great crowds or [have] read the Bible many times; I'm going to Heaven just like the thief on the cross who said in that last moment: 'Lord, remember me.'"

The Kingdom of God, both here on earth and in heaven, is about welcoming and receiving, about and being welcomed and received.

Rev. Sherrin Marshall taught me an example of this by saying that, during Communion, we offered our cupped palm to receive the bread rather than reaching out and taking it; the gesture is an outward expression of an inward reality: all that we are and all that we have are predicated on what we have first received. Who among us didn't enter the world, miraculously, as babes, vulnerable and utterly dependent? Who among us could have survived without receiving care? Who among us won't exit the world much as we arrived: vulnerable, wanting to be received by God much as we needed to be welcomed by loving caregivers at birth.

Is it any wonder we have such complex feelings about marriage and children, why we wouldn't want to connect them to Jesus? They expose all our greatest vulnerabilities; they call us to "step up to the plate" and commit ourselves fully.

May we, in gratitude for what has been given us, honor our spouses by receiving and welcoming them, in pain and in joy, and being received and welcomed by them in our pain and our joy. We are all of us vulnerable and precious; worthy of love, care and respect.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Parini, Jay. "Jesus...Married with Children?" 12 November 2014. [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com).