

“Divorce and World Communion”

Mark 10:2-12

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When I was in seminary back in the early 1980's I was told by more than one of my professors that the most meaningful theology comes when two or more disparate and even conflicting matters push up against each other. To illustrate their point they would describe food combinations. They'd say things like, "who would have ever thought that cucumbers and peanut butter would make for a good sandwich," or that "chili powder would make chocolate more flavorful."

Though their illustrations were lacking sometimes, their point about looking for insights that are not immediately apparent between two teachings has stuck with me. Because of their teachings I am more inclined to ask if two ideas have anything to say to each other than I am to dismiss the possibility that they might.

When I read today's gospel passage, which has the section heading "Jesus' Teaching on Divorce," in one of my translations, and I knew that the first Sunday in October is always designated World Communion Sunday, no clear or even vague connection between the two came to my mind. I was perplexed by the National Council of Church's selection of Mark 10 for the lectionary on World Communion Sunday. I would have thought the passages that actually record Jesus celebrating communion with the disciples would have been more appropriate. None the less, I held to my seminary roots and asked what Jesus' teaching on divorce and world communion Sunday might have to say to each other.

Let us begin by unpacking our gospel passage.

This is one of many encounters that Jesus has with the teachers of Jewish law. They ask Jesus whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus asks them "What did Moses command?"

The Pharisees respond in an almost disinterested tone: "Moses said a man could write a letter of divorce and send his wife away. "The Pharisees said nothing about the impact of divorce, or whether there needed to be any just cause for divorce, only that it was permissible for a man to write a letter if he felt like it.

Jesus was far less interested in what the law permitted and most concerned about relationships and the well being of the most vulnerable people in the community. Jesus knew that one way women and children were cast into poverty and cast out of the protections of the community, was through divorce. Women and children had few rights or resources in the middle-east of Jesus' day. They were not allowed to own property or receive an inheritance of livestock and other sources of a livelihood. They were dependent on men for their survival.

When Jesus hears the matter of fact answer the Pharisees gave to his question, it was apparent that their concerns did not include the wellbeing of women and children.

So Jesus responds not with the laws of Moses but with the intentions of the Creator, that a husband and wife join together and become one. It was God's intention that in marriage our spouse is no longer separate from our self and that a husband cannot think of his own wellbeing separate from his wife and children. Jesus' response might be interpreted in this way, "God intended that marriage be a gift to the whole family, not just men, and it is therefore against God's wishes for a man to divorce his wife because he lusts after someone else, or because he no longer wants to be responsible for his family."

When Jesus said: "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her," he might have added the phrase "because your hearts are hardened. I give you this law".

The issue for Jesus is not that divorce condemns people, the issue for Jesus is that divorce as was "permitted" in Jesus' day, was abused by men and the consequence was hardship and poverty for women and children.

Current Experience of Women Around the World

This passage from Mark's gospel, short and as initially offensive it seems to be, brings to mind many stories about women and children from around the world that many of us have read about over the past few years.

Gary Mortnesen's book, "Three Cups of Tea," about his experiences in Afghanistan and has gripped many of us. Moretenson's desire for good things to happen in the lives of the Afghan people led him to build, equip and staff schools for girls. Khaled Hosseini, author of "The Kite Runner" and "A Thousand Splendid Suns" also chronicles the live of children and women in the male dominated world of Afghanistan. Particularly in his second novel he tells stories of abuse perpetrated by husbands against their wives, of young girls being married off to older men who have great power over them and whose violence against these women is sanctioned by the community.

The August 23rd edition of the New York Times Magazine is dedicated to the plight of women around the world. The cover page shows a picture of a powerful and beautiful women from Burundi whose name is Goretti Nyabanda. The caption on the cover reads: "In many parts of the world, women are routinely beaten, raped or sold into prostitution. They are denied access to medical care, education and economic and political power. Changing that could change everything. Women's rights are the cause of our time."

Within the pages of the magazine are stories of women and girls from India, China, Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, Rwanda, Burundi and more. Many of the stories share a great deal in common, the stories are almost inter-changeable from one country to another.

Nicholas Kristoff and his wife Sheryl WuDunn wrote about Abbas Be, a teenage girl from India who at the age 14 was sent to New Dehli to be a maid. "Instead, she was locked up in a brothel, beaten with cricket bats, gang raped and told she would have to cater to customers." Along with 70 other girls, Abbas was terrorized until she was freed by police and taken to a shelter for healing. Abbas learned bookbinding skills by which she makes a living and she teaches classes to girls and families about escaping forced prostitution.

In their reporting on women and children worldwide, Kristoff and WuDunn unearthed some powerful information. They learned that when women received microloans or other aid they put almost all of it toward economic development, food, education and medical care, but men used significant amounts for alcohol, tobacco and prostitution. They found that educating women helped reduce birthrates, reduced violence, improved health and brought greater prosperity. WuDunn and Kristoff realized when they were reporting on the Tiananmen Square massacre of 400-800 people, that they were not reporting that approximately 39,000 baby girls were dying in China each year because they were not valued, fed or given medical care. And they weren't reporting on the 100,000 Chinese girls who were kidnapped and trafficked in brothels, and they weren't reporting that more girls and women are missing globally than the number of all men killed on the battlefield in all the wars of the 20th Century.

The statistics about the lives and suffering of women globally is staggering, which is the reason why on the cover of the magazine the claim is made that "Women's rights are the cause of our time."

World Communion Sunday

In 1936 the Presbyterian Church began a practice known as "World Communion Sunday". While the annual practice began in the one denomination it was never intended to remain a single denomination's practice.

The Presbyterians offered their idea to the National and World Council of Churches as a way of illustrating our common life in Christ. For at least one Sunday a year, Christians around the world were asked to pause and imagine that the global body of Christ was sitting at one table, breaking bread and drinking the cup of blessing. We are asked to see the faces of people in Korea, South Africa, Iran, Brazil, Canada, Honduras, Somalia, France, and Kosovo as the faces of our brothers and sisters. Once a year we are invited to recognize that God's promises are not just for us, but for all people. With the bread and wine in our hands God transforms our hearts, minds and relationships, and we cannot remain indifferent to the plight of people around the world.

When Jesus taught the Pharisees about divorce it wasn't really about what was permissible according to the Law of Moses. What Jesus was teaching them had to do with the wellbeing of the community's most vulnerable people and responsibilities of the people who controlled wealth and power to honor their commitments.

When we share the body and blood of Christ on World Communion Sunday we remember the great gifts of God's love for us and we remember that in receiving these gifts, we bind ourselves to all God's people and we become responsible to each other.

When Jesus taught about divorce he was reminding those who gathered that they were responsible to each other. As we receive Communion today we are reminded that we are responsible to each other, especially to the most vulnerable in our midst and around the world. When we remember this God's world becomes less violent and God's people become healthier. As you receive the bread and the cup today give thanks for all God's love to all the people of the earth.