

“Sign of Integrity”
Psalm 26, Mark 10:1-16
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Let the children come to me, do not stop them for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

I have a statue in my office of this scene—Jesus embracing the children. It came as a gift from my mother after I received my Doctorate back in the 1995. It is an iconic image often represented in paintings or seen as large sculptures on Christian schools or college campuses. This verse figured heavily in the Sunday school movement of the 1800s when there an awakening of sorts to the lack of provisions for children in church life. This passage is used to elevate the importance of children. And when taken with the verses immediately preceding it, it remind adults that they can become lost in their own self-importance.

When I was a kid, we used to run around our neighborhood and play a lot of different games with the kids who lived near us. One of the games we used to play was “Red Light, Green Light.” Do you remember that game? One person is “it,” and they would stand at one end of the yard while all the other kids lined up at the other end. Then the one who was “it” would shout, “Green Light!” and turn their back to the group. The other kids would all try to run toward him/her before they turned around and shouted “Red Light!” If you were caught moving when “Red Light” was called you had to go back and start over. The goal was to get close enough to tag the person who was it but do it all without being seen moving. It occurs to me that this was a microcosm of what much of childhood was like—how much can we get away with without getting caught? How far can we push things before Mom finds out? How much can we do without *actually* breaking the rules? Like when you’re told not to touch

your little brother so you frenetically wave your hands all around his head while singing “I’m not touching you, I’m not touching you...!”

Just how far can you bend a rule before it breaks?

That's really the question that the Pharisees ask of Jesus. Notice first though, in the passage that we just read, that Jesus and his disciples have “crossed over the Jordan.” Usually in Mark's gospel, when Jesus goes beyond the traditional borders of the Holy Land, it is a signal or a sign that he is going to go beyond the traditional understandings of Jewish teaching. You'll remember that when he was in the region of Tyre that he encountered the Syro-phoenician woman and taught the disciples that their understanding of who was accepted by God was insufficient. Now he goes again outside the borders and he is going to stretch their understanding again. **He goes someplace new to teach something new.**

The Pharisees ask him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” That was a silly question. Of course it was lawful, everyone knew that it was. What they are trying to get Jesus to do is to pick a side in an argument that was going on during that time. It is legal for a man to divorce his wife, but for what cause? In the Law, in the book of Deuteronomy it says that a man may give his wife a certificate of divorce if “he finds something objectionable about her.” The debate was over what that means. One of the rabbinic schools taught that the only real grounds for divorce was adultery. Another school taught that almost anything could count as something objectionable. Rabbi Hillel said that a man could divorce his wife even if she only spoiled his dinner. Rabbi Akiba said a man could divorce his wife even if it was only because he found another woman more attractive.¹

Notice in all this discussion that there is nothing about the woman being able to divorce her husband;

1 Cohen, Abraham. Everyman's Talmud. p. 167

Hebrew tradition had no provision for this. A woman did not have much legal standing in Jewish society. A woman was considered the property of her father until she got married, and then she was the property of her husband. The biblical Hebrew lacks a term equivalent to the English word *marriage*. Instead, the word is a verb meaning “takes,” a man takes a certain woman. Remember that marriages in those days were not really the same thing we think of today. There's no evidence of any religious ceremony binding a husband and wife together, rather there are contracts between families. Marriage was for bearing children and in many ancient societies, even more than one wife was still allowed (as long as the man could afford them). Marriage was not an expression of love, but it had a utilitarian function. A man got married in order to have children to pass down his family's land or property. He also got married in order to solidify his social standing. But people did not really marry because they fell in love.

But notice what Jesus said here: It's not just “if a man divorces his wife,” but “if she divorces her husband.” Jesus assumes an equality that did not really exist in the Hebrew culture of his time. Now it was true that in Roman society, woman had more agency in marriage and divorce and this may have influenced Jesus to include women but also remember, Jesus is trying to stretch their minds to embrace new understandings of old traditional ways...they've “crossed the Jordan.”

But regardless of who has the right to initiate it or under what circumstances, Jesus speaks against divorce...period. This has been used to support Church positions against divorce for centuries: most notably the Catholic Church in our day. In fact this first half of the reading has provided the substance for many a sermon, many speeches and laws and policies prohibiting divorce.

But biblical scholarship would lead us to understand that taking just the literal understanding of this passage—that divorce is wrong—is missing the greater lesson Jesus is teaching here. Jesus is

addressing the ways in which husbands have manipulated the divorce option provided by Moses to their own advantage and how, by extension, wives who have little agency, are ill-served and ill-treated by such a libertine use of the divorce clause.

And this brings us back to the little children with which we began.

More often than not people read this chapter and pastors preach on this passage as if there are two messages here: one having to do with divorce, the other having to do with the place of children. The part of the reading near the end about welcoming children therefore seems very out of place in this discussion about the legalities of divorce. So you either get a blistering sermon on divorce or an edifying sermon on the innocence of children. But, actually, I think the children present the key to understanding the overall message. And most surprisingly, the message is not about children or divorce. It's about power: the powerful and the powerless.

Jesus is trying to teach the men, those who have power in that day, to treat the women with the steadfast love and faithfulness of which the psalmist speaks. It's about recognizing the power of the insider and the powerlessness of the outsider, the power of men, the power of the rich, those with social standing. It's about the stumbling blocks we place in the paths of those less powerful. It's about striving for *just* relationships.

If you've noticed over the last few weeks when we have looked at these chapters in Mark, we have seen that Jesus speaks of little children, or little ones, several times: when the disciples are arguing over which of them is the greatest or judging an outsider. The children or little ones are lifted up as a symbol of those who are vulnerable or powerless, especially when those with power act unjustly under

the auspices of religion: like husbands using the Deuteronomic laws to divorce their wives in today's example. Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." That doesn't necessarily mean that we have to be meek and unquestioning. I don't know about yours but my kids questioned everything. Actually it means that we receive the kingdom as we would receive a little child. The kingdom comes to us in ways that we do not expect, in the least of these, in the poor, the hungry, the sick, the woman who has been discarded, the child who is lost, the senior in the nursing home. As we receive and care for the powerless, we are receiving and caring for Christ.

The psalmist says, "I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering. Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind. For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you." The disciples have been learning as they have traveled toward Jerusalem with Jesus that their ideas of God's kingdom were too small. They've learned that God's kingdom is often found in the powerless in their society, the foreigner, the little child, the woman they've overlooked. And as we discover this week after week, I wonder: have we been learning that too?