

October 7, 2018
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 10:2-16

The Pharisees approached [Jesus] and asked, "Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?" They were testing him. He said to them in reply, "What did Moses command you?" They replied, "Moses permitted him to write a bill of divorce and dismiss her." But Jesus told them, "Because of the hardness of your hearts he wrote you this commandment. But 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, no human being must separate."

In the house the disciples again questioned him about this. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

And people were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this he became indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it." Then he embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them.

Background:

Last Sunday the gospel text ended with Jesus' exhortation to get rid of those areas that lead one to sin. The gospel for this week almost directly follows last Sunday's text. In between are the following three verses: "Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if salt becomes insipid, with what will you restore its flavor? Keep salt in yourselves and you will have peace with one another. He set out from there and went into the district of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds gathered around him and, as was his custom, he again taught them." (Mark 9:49-10:1)

Mark's community would have recognized that Jesus is in the location that was governed by Herod, the one who had John the Baptist imprisoned and beheaded for speaking out against Herod's marriage to his brother's wife. They would also recognize that the Pharisees' question regarding divorce is not a simple request to hear Jesus' teaching on the matter, but an attempt to diminish Jesus' status and increase their own.

The question and Jesus' response focus on the disparity between what is permitted and the ideal that God intends. Jesus states that God's intent from the beginning of creation is that husband and wife should be one. What God brings together as one is incapable of being divided. What Moses permitted was quite different. People of the day would have understood that it was God who was acting in nature and in their cultural practices too. Just as children did not choose their parents, they of marrying age did not choose their spouse. They understood that through parents God was responsible for bringing children into the world, and again through parents God was acting to bring two people together in marriage.

In verses 10-12 Jesus continues his reflection with his disciples, away from the crowd and the Pharisees. Here he raises the possibility for a woman to divorce her husband, at least in theory. This would have been quite shocking for his disciples, because the Jewish culture would not have considered this a possibility. Women were more like property, and had value because of their reproductive potential. If a husband divorced his wife, shame was cast on the men of her family. The male relatives were expected to make the situation right even if that meant bloodshed. If a couple was found to be in an adulterous relationship, the husband of the woman was shamed. A woman did not have enough status in this culture to be shamed. This male-dominated way of thinking could not conceive of adultery by a husband as a sin against his wife. Jesus' teaching in verse 11 would be a totally new perspective for the Jewish community.

However, Roman law at the time did allow for a woman to divorce her husband. With this Roman perspective incorporated into Jesus' teaching on divorce, it leaves scholars uncertain whether this adaptation originated with Jesus or was an adaptation by Mark who reflected on Jesus' teaching. This teaching would have been difficult to accept for those who struggled to maintain the purity of their traditions. They would see any Roman influence as representative of their oppressors standing between them and their rightful position as God's chosen people.

The text offers no insight as to why the disciples prevented the children from coming to Jesus. Instead the text says only that Jesus was upset with the disciples' behavior. Nor does Mark tell us how it is that one should be like a child. It would be helpful to remember that in that time, children, like women, had no rights or esteem in themselves. Without an explanation or the context for Jesus' behavior, the apparent intent is to show who Jesus saw value in. Jesus is treating those who had no status, in society or in the religious tradition of the day, as having value and importance in the eyes of God.

Reflection Questions:

1. Among the couples you know, what are some of the reasons people decide to marry?
2. When I think of the people in my community who do not seem to have full status...
3. How do you see God working in the bringing together of you and your spouse? (Or, if you are not married, in the bringing together of a couple that you know well?)
4. Jesus seems to have deliberately traveled into the area where his cousin John was killed by Herod, and he is confronted by the same issue. Are there areas, either geographical or emotional, that you avoid because of past experiences? Does Jesus' action in the gospel text speak to you?
5. When you hear Jesus distinguishing between what Moses permitted and what God intended...
6. When Jesus tells the disciples to "let the children come to me," I feel...
7. In today's gospel, Jesus seems to be deliberately challenging what people of the day had become accustomed to—making distinctions between men and women and adults and children. Can you take some time to talk with God about a place where God may be challenging you, where you are feeling called to challenge another, or some other thought that arose within you as you reflected on this gospel?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for October 7, 2018, the Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Lord God said: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him."
So the Lord God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air,
and he brought them to the man; whatever the man called each of them would be its name.
The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all wild animals;
but none proved to be the suitable partner for the man. So the Lord God cast a deep sleep on the man,
and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.
The Lord God then built up into a woman the rib that he had taken from the man.
When he brought her to him, the man said: "This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called 'woman,' for out of 'her man' this one has been taken." That is why a man
leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh.

May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives. Blessed are you who fear the Lord, who walk in his ways!
For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork; blessed shall you be, and favored.
Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home; your children like olive
plants around your table. Behold, thus is the man blessed who fears the Lord.
The Lord bless you from Zion: may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.
May you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!

Brothers and sisters: He "for a little while" was made "lower than the angels,"
that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that he,
for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory,
should make the leader to their salvation perfect through suffering. He who consecrates and those
who are being consecrated all have one origin. Therefore, he is not ashamed to call them "brothers."

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and dismiss her." Jesus said, "Because of the hardness of your hearts he wrote you this
commandment. But 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, no human being must separate."
In the house the disciples again questioned Jesus about this. He said to them,
"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her;
and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."
And people were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them.
When Jesus saw this he became indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me;
do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you,
whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it."
Then he embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them.

Excerpts from Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 128:1-6; Hebrews 2:9-11; and Mark 10:2-16