
“An Upside-Down Kingdom: Where the Children Are Blessed”

A SERMON on Mark 10:2-16 for the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
Preached 3 October 2021 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
Cloverdale United Church, Surrey, British Columbia, Canada

My generation went through quite a phase with bracelets when we were adolescents in the 1990s. Probably the most well-known wrist-worn fascination for us was the so-called “slap bracelet”. Perhaps you remember them... a strip of steel a little over 20 centimetres long and about 2-and-a-half centimetres wide, usually wrapped in some sort of brightly coloured or patterned fabric or silicone, it had this curved profile across its width that meant it could stretch out stiff and straight, or when you “slapped” it onto your wrist, that curved profile would release and the bracelet would wrap up around your wrist. Like the fidget spinners of a few years back and the silicone push bubble toys that are popular right now, fidgeting with it over and over again was the main attraction of the slap bracelet, not any sort of fashion statement.

A bracelet that did make a bit of a statement rose in popularity among adolescents and others in the 1990s, too, though—at least in certain circles. Made out of any number of materials and in any number of designs, WWJD bracelets—that is, “What would Jesus do?”—could be found on the wrists of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people across that decade. Although not exclusively so, they tended to be most popular among those with more conservative-evangelical leaning faith and piety. Within that community the question, “What would Jesus do?” functioned as a bit of subliminal morality and behaviour policing. Thinking about cheating on that test or at that ball game? Well, what would Jesus do? Having tense conflict with your parents or your siblings? What would Jesus do? Things getting a little too intimate between you and your boyfriend or girlfriend? What would Jesus do?

The way that these bracelets got pushed onto adolescents in that era fit with a lot of the moralistic purity culture of American right-wing evangelicalism of the time, another simplistic token that drove home a message of a particular kind of social control. That said, though, ultimately the question is not an entirely bad one. If you’re looking for a bit of help in discerning something, whether in your life or in the world, you could do a lot worse than asking “What would Jesus do?”

Does that question, though—“what would Jesus do?”—does it help when we come around to the question of divorce, the topic that takes centre-stage in this morning’s reading from the gospel of Mark?

First of all, let’s be honest: this is a difficult text to deal with, largely because divorce itself is a difficult thing for anyone touched by it. I myself have never met *anyone* who has simply taken divorce as some light thing, you know, just some easy solution, just one “not that big of a deal” choice out of many. Everyone I’ve worked with who’s been through a divorce, or has contemplated a divorce, or has been part of a family dealing with the possibility or reality of divorce—for every one of them, there has already been enough pain, broken-heartedness, disappointment, sorrow, anger, and more that they’ve felt and carried, and that was *without* having some scripture passage like this one from Mark thrown in their face. Quite frankly, anyone who has gone through a divorce likely already feels bad enough about themselves and the situation, without having to listen to Jesus talk about “hardness of heart” and “adultery” and having “no one separate” what “God has joined together.”

While I haven't myself dealt with divorce in my close family, the family of my spouse Adam has. It was in the 1960's that Adam's grandmother divorced his grandfather. The details are not important, suffice it to say that it was not a happy marriage. So, in a time when divorce was still very much a taboo subject, Adam's grandfather moved to Australia and his grandmother became a single parent for their four children.

None of us imagine that it was an easy experience for her. She was a devout Methodist, so particularly for a person of her generation, we can probably assume that she would have heard this passage, and others like it, and that they would have weighed heavily on her. We can only speculate as to the pressure that she would have felt from her family and her friends and her church.

So, when Adam's grandfather was transferred back to the United States, his grandmother re-married him. They stayed married for the rest of their lives.

Indeed, this is a difficult text, one that has led many to believe that they should—that they *must*—stay in unhappy marriages, in broken marriages, in marriages marked by alcohol or drugs or abuse. This is a text that is at least partly behind the stigma that people who have been divorced have faced in the past and continue to face. All of that comes flooding in each time we hear this passage read anew, a presence as real as the words on the page themselves.

So it is not simply a rhetorical question that I asked earlier, about whether or not the question of “what would Jesus do?”, whether it actually helps when we're talking about divorce.

But here's the thing... that question, “what *would* Jesus do?”, it is *not* always the same as “what *did* Jesus do?”. What *would* Jesus say is not always the same thing as what *did* Jesus say. Oftentimes, of course, what Jesus *did* say or *did* do is a good clue to what Jesus *would* say or do. But it's not always quite so simple. After all, times change, people change, cultural norms and practices change.

Marriage today is not the same as marriage was back in Jesus' time. Moreover, neither is divorce today the same as divorce was back then. In a time before child support payments, before legal proceedings that entitled both partners to a share of property and wealth, before women had very many rights or much social standing on their own, divorce was a sentence to poverty for the woman and for any children. An unmarried woman, separated from her family of origin, had very little standing in society and likely no safety net at all.

In the time that Jesus said the things we heard in today's scripture passage, a married man—and *only* the man, not the woman—could simply produce a certificate of divorce and that was it. He was off to whatever new life he wanted, but he left brokenness and destitution in his wake. I think this is what Jesus is speaking to when he responds to the Pharisees' question about divorce—the lack of concern for the wellbeing of others, for the brokenness it caused, for the injustice that was inherent to it. I don't believe Jesus was advocating for the primacy of the nuclear family—it simply didn't exist in his day; their concept of family was broader and more fluid than ours is today. And Jesus himself even seems to push against the idea of family before all else; after all this is the same Jesus who proclaimed that “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

More to the point, I have to imagine that Jesus was responding to the callousness and casualness of the question that was posed to him... as though a marriage could be tossed aside as easily as a piece of paper... as though any relationship could be treated as disposable... as though a husband, or anyone else for that matter, could persist in the belief that they did not need anyone else, that they could exist independent of any relationship.

Jesus reminds us that once we were alone, once we were singular, and God saw that it was not good. Perhaps you remember that little scene from way back in the book of Genesis: “It is not good that the human should be alone,” God says, after looking over all that God had created. So God made the singular plural so that we might come together, that we might be in relationship, and in relationship, discover wholeness.

That can look like marriage, yes. I have also seen it in lifelong friendships; I’ve seen it between parent and child; I’ve seen it among siblings; and I’ve seen it between neighbours and church members alike who care for one another like family, carrying one another through times of joy and times of great illness. In none of these cases would we expect one party to simply dismiss the other, as if they were unnecessary, as if they were unneeded, as if the relationship had no value. To do so would be cruel. To do so would be to deny that God created us to need one another, God created us to be in community.

It is all about relationship.

And so, back to that question: “what would Jesus do?” or “what would Jesus say?” When it comes to divorce, or really just about anything, our answers to that question have to be rooted in that deepest reality that goes all the way back to God’s work in creation itself, that it’s all about relationship. That is, ultimately, what Jesus himself was doing when he answered the question of the Pharisees way back some 2,000 years ago: in the face of an abstract question about a disembodied and injustice-inducing legal practice that disregarded the human realities of those who were involved, Jesus drew them back to the reality of relationship that was *supposed to be* at the heart of it all.

To us who live in the contemporary world, where the realities of both marriage and divorce are very different from what they were in 1st-century Palestine, I can’t answer with 100% certainty what Jesus would say regarding divorce, but I am quite certain he would draw us back to the reality of relationship—our relationship with our spouse, our relationship with ourselves, our relationship with God and neighbour. Jesus would see us in our full humanity and he would see our pain when those relationships are already broken off, often long before a legal arrangement is terminated.

A wise group of pastors and theologians that make up a collective called “enfleshed”¹ wrote the following in reflection upon today’s passage:

*Many times, divorce is the most loving decision.
Because people change, but not always together.
Or trauma occurs, and healing must happen elsewhere.
Or systems of domination constricted life in the before,
and now it’s finally time to blossom.
Many times, divorce is the hardest decision.
Those who ignorantly scoff
about “taking the easy way out”
don’t know how it can be an apocalypse.
How it can destroy before it revives.
Many times, divorce is the most mature decision.
One born from discernment and care
about what life and love need to flourish.
One that takes seriously that there is a time for everything.*

¹ <https://enfleshed.com/>

*Sometimes it is a time to stay.
Sometimes it is a time to part.
To be divorced
is not to be a failure at love
nor incapable of commitment.
Though assumptions and stigma still linger
to be divorced says nothing on its own
about a person's heart, their relational capacities, or priorities.
Thank God for those who call into question endurance without love.
Thank God for those who are willing to bear the judgment of others to chase what is right.
Thank God for those who fight for themselves and each other,
even when that means choosing divorce.
(No, it's not ALWAYS good nor right nor just - like any other thing.
No, it's not a pure decision nor always the right one.
No, it's not without its own complications or even always available.
But many times it is - and that's not said enough.)²*

It is all about relationship. When we act as though we don't need one another, when we act as though the other is disposable, worthless, detestable, then we are acting against the created order. We are acting contrary to the way God made us to be—and that can happen whether we are married, divorced, single, or widowed. For we need one another: spouses and siblings, grandparents and grandchildren, neighbours and friends, the people next to us in the pews and the people who sit in other corners of the globe. We need one another. We are not complete without one another.

Jesus calls us back to relationship and back to community. He calls us back to that place where we can at last look at each other as for the first time and say, “Yes, this is good, this is the one.”

BLESSING AND HONOUR, GLORY AND POWER BE UNTO GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

² <https://www.facebook.com/enfleshedword/posts/3083804781849218>