

A God Without Limits

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Mark 10:2-16

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Today's text is a hard one for some to hear. The passage today talks a lot about the issue of divorce. Divorce is never easy to talk about in any circle, and it is especially not easy to talk about from the pulpit.

However, by the time I got to the end of writing this sermon, I was feeling a little bit better about preaching on a subject that is so real and so relevant to so many folks in today's society. I hope you will feel that way, too.

Divorce is a subject that I know causes a great deal of pain in the lives of those affected by it. But, I think if there is any place we can talk about painful subjects, it is here in church-- here in the presence of our Creator who loves us and in the presence of our church family that loves us as well.

First, I want to look at the context in which we find our text for today. In the Sunday school class I am teaching on the Gospel of Mark, we talked a couple of weeks ago about a technique Mark uses in his writing. Sometimes this technique is called a *Marcan Sandwich*. We have got part of a sandwich in our lectionary reading today.

If you will open your Bibles and look back at 9:42, Jesus is talking about little ones—he has been talking about children. Then, beginning in chapter 10, we hear a discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning divorce. For the top slice of bread, we go back to the topic of children. A *Marcan Sandwich*. Keep the contents of this sandwich in mind as we talk about divorce today.

Divorces in the 1st century and before were very different from the divorces of today. Before Christianity, men could remove their wives from their homes through a certificate of divorce—for any reason. Too much salt in the lamb stew? —Boom! Out she went.

There was no women's movement, no ERA in the 1st century. There were no women's shelters, no welfare or public assistance. Women did not *have* paying jobs outside the home, so if her husband decided to divorce her, she would become homeless and normally have to prostitute herself in order to survive.

When the Pharisees try to trap Jesus into saying something wrong or against the laws concerning marriage, Jesus does what he did quite

often—he turned the tables on his questioners—he turned the question into a teaching moment about God.

The Pharisees asked Jesus what was **allowed—what was lawful** concerning marriage and divorce. What Jesus told them—as only the Son of God could—was what was **intended** by marriage. He took their questioning to a higher level than merely minding your P's and Q's by following the letter of the law.

What Jesus was saying to the Pharisees is that the way a man could divorce his wife in the 1st century was **just not right!** That is not what God had in mind at all. God's plan for man and woman was always good, and this style of divorce was obviously **not** good for **both** man and woman.

I don't think Christ is standing on high here condemning **21st** century marriages that have failed. He is condemning the abuse and the unequal patriarchal system of the **1st century**—(and in our century today, to the extent the patriarchal system continues on). As we read in Genesis today, marriage is based in creation, not law, as the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus into saying.

It is very clear here whose side Jesus is on. Jesus is on the side of the weak, the vulnerable. God is on the side of the little ones, no matter the cause of their littleness.

Remember the Marcan Sandwich? Think about this passage on divorce being the middle layer between the two slices of bread made up of powerless children, and the flavors of the sandwich start to come together. We have a sandwich made up of two slices of weak and powerless children, whom Jesus adores, with a hunk of disenfranchised, cast-off divorced women in the middle. Not a very tasty sandwich, to say the least, but you can see how all these passages really do fit together.

I have said before that I don't believe there are a lot of wasted words in the Bible. One of the ways I think God works through our biblical texts is through the construction of multiple layers of meaning. I don't think the gospel writer Mark could have ever even imagined what divorce could be like in our time, but I do think God could.

Perhaps what we have here in this passage in Mark are not only rules and guidelines for Christian behavior in marriages and families—and this is an accurate explanation—that is part of what we read in this text. However—as one of those God-given layered meanings, perhaps we also have a lesson about the nature of God.

We often attempt to place ourselves in many, if not most of our biblical texts, as a way of understanding what God wants us to know about

his will for our lives. But maybe, just maybe, these texts are really more about God than about us.

Maybe God wants to move us out of our narrow thinking about *only* divorce in this passage and into a broader scope of vision. You know God is all about relationships—our relationship with God, with our neighbors, with our spouses or family and our selves. Maybe this passage is about coming to an understanding about all these relationships and the limits and boundaries we place on the relationships in our lives.

We humans have a way of putting finite answers to all of lives' questions. At times, we can be just like the Pharisees wanting to know solid, non-abstract answers to relationship questions. That's only natural—we are finite people that live within many different sets of limits. We understand limits. We live within all sorts of sets of limits. (Speed limits, # of eggs per week, limit on the deer you shoot, etc.)

We have limits within the relationships we have, too. We have all heard stories about marriages in which one person is an alcoholic. The sober spouse loves their mate and wants to do everything he or she can to make the marriage work. "Just one more chance," the drunk will say. "I won't ever drink again," the alcoholic says, and the spouse concedes yet one more time, in order to try and make the marriage work. This routine can go on for years before the sober spouse realizes that he or she has finally reached his or her limit. He reached his limit on what he can stand, on how far his love will take him.

We all have limits, don't we? We all have a certain breaking point where we can just not stand any more. However—and I think this is the message in our text today—our human limits **must** be set along side the counter truth—that God's love has no limits. We can come to the end of our limits in our relationships with others, but God never does. God does not have these same limits upon his love for us.

So, as we gather around the Lord's Table today in celebration with all our Christian brothers and sisters around the world, I want you to hear, that there is a very positive and uplifting message in our text today. Our Good News for the day is this: despite our shortcomings, our limits, and our inability to always make all our relationships work—we are still loved and cherished by the one who made us in his image. Despite the broken relationships we may have been a part of, God is limitlessly loving us and always faithful! Thanks be to God! Amen.