

Highfield Rd Uniting Church
Mark 10:2 - 16

Grace in our weakness



I was taught a long time ago, and I have been reminded by watching seemingly endless press conferences on Covid, that questions are important. A question can often tell you more about the person asking the question than the answer can tell you about the person answering the question. How a question is

framed, and the particular grammar used can expose intent, bias, or even malice. Not all questions are innocent requests for information.

If Mark had not told us that the question from the Pharisees about divorce was a test, we could have worked that out by closely examining the question itself. The Pharisees didn't ask:

“Teacher, what is God’s instruction about divorce?”

They didn't even ask:

“Teacher, is it proper for a married couple to get divorced?”

They asked whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. And that question is loaded with bias, patriarchal dominance, and legalism. In no way is it an innocent request for information. However, too much of our response to this teaching from Jesus, and I admit this myself when I first read it, is based on treating it as Jesus' commandment on divorce instead of Jesus' response to a bad question. If, instead of a legal ruling on divorce, we hear God's intent for human life then what seems like two disconnected stories - a question on divorce and the welcome of children - become household examples in response to Jesus' comment after teaching about not putting stumbling blocks in the way of little ones - “Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.”

Here is another question, “Pastor, will my son go to hell for getting a divorce?” A question that is loaded with the assumption that Jesus was commanding against divorce - that divorce is a sin. And that is how the church throughout the ages has responded to this teaching. Maybe a natural response given that Matthew and Luke contain the same story and even Paul advises against divorce. But is that reading of Jesus words just putting a stumbling block in the way of a little one? Burdening this mother with a double grief - a broken relationship and a stern God? I am not trying to dismiss the seriousness of Jesus words or the high standard of God's will in the very act of the creation of humans as male and female. What I am pointing to is the compassion for our weakness and the call to humility and love.

The Pharisees ask, “Is it lawful?” and Jesus responds, “What did Moses command you?” That is, what does the Law say; what is God's command? And they answer, “Moses allowed us.” There is a big difference between ‘command’ and ‘allow’. The law is silent on divorce because it was never God's intention. Rather, there is the gracious allowance for divorce in recognition of human frailty. However, Jesus says this allowance was worded as ‘a man may write a letter of dismissal and divorce his wife’ because of

hardness of heart. If God's intention of 'the two shall become one' was taken seriously then the allowance for frailty would not be so one sided. The divorce certificate would not look like a man casting off a possession. And divorce would not leave a woman without a home or family. It is not God's intention that a man may divorce his wife, or a woman divorce her husband. Jesus lifts our sights to a much higher intention. If the *two* are *one*, the two would seek peace and a better solution to difficulties in the marriage.

Why do the disciples stop the mothers bringing their children for a blessing? Through this section of the Gospel story, since the grand revelation of Jesus on the mountain in chapter 8, Mark has been weaving stories about the disciples focussed on greatness or glory, together with stories of the real kingdom being about children and the little ones. With Mark placing the story of children here, this is one more example of a stumbling block to faith and the need for humility to live at peace with one another. This new kingdom that Jesus is ushering in *is* important, but that doesn't mean that it is only for important people in the way that the disciples thought of themselves. "The master is busy with important work and can't be bothered by lowly women and children!" As we have noted in the previous two weeks, children were of no status in 1st Century Mediterranean society and had no place in religious affairs until they reached the age of recognition. But here, Jesus does even more than the previous story of placing a child in the centre of the conversation, he elevates children to be the centre of the faith. The kingdom belongs to children, and you cannot enter it unless you receive it as a child!

The kingdom is not high and important and grand men's business. The kingdom is about the salt of love and humility that flavours every relationship. That calls you to be the last and the servant, that stops you putting a stumbling block in the path of someone's faith, that recognises that we are frail and need God's grace, and that allows you to happily welcome children, and welcome the kingdom with all the love and wonder and innocence of a child. The salt of love and humility that allows you to be at peace with one another.

God's way opened through Jesus Christ is life changing, life giving, and deeply important, but it is also the stuff of everyday life - marriage and relationships, children and family, ordinary interactions. The great theologies play out in our simple lives - loving service to all and humility that calls for peace.