

## Family Values

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, October 4, 2015, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Mark 10:2-16](#)

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When I was a young teenager, my father's sister decided to get married. She'd been married, had a child, and was divorced before I was born.<sup>1</sup> So I only knew my aunt as a single mother. I also started reading the Bible and trying to understand what is meant as a young teenager, and I started with the gospels, and I started with Mark (because it's the shortest). This means that I read today's gospel lesson at about the same time my divorced aunt decided to marry her boyfriend.

I was concerned. I'm not sure if I was more concerned about how Jesus would view my aunt or how the addition of an uncle and his family would impact my family's celebration of Christmas – but I was concerned.

I was confronted by this scripture reading again about a quarter of a century ago, which seems much too long ago, so let's just say it was 24 years ago. I was serving a church in Spokane and was part of an ecumenical lectionary study group: three episcopal priests, a Disciples of Christ pastor, a Presbyterian pastor or two, me, maybe someone else.

Today's gospel lesson came up in the lectionary. It was paired with Genesis 2:18-24, the section of the second creation story where the woman is created from the rib of the man. It included the sentence Jesus quotes about the two becoming one flesh. The Psalm was 128, which includes these lines: "Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways. You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord."<sup>2</sup>

The others in the Bible study started talking about the lessons as I considered the risk of saying out loud what was going on in my heart. I wasn't out to very many people in Spokane, but I decided to risk coming out to these colleagues. I told them that as a gay man, I found these scriptures difficult to hear because they didn't just ignore my reality, they denied my reality.

And here we are, 24 years later, with this gospel lesson again. It's paired with different readings in the lectionary now, but the reading itself hasn't changed. And it feels as if it has little to do with the fact that today is the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, World Communion Sunday, and the first day of Mental Illness Awareness Week. And it feels like it has little to do with the fact that during the past week there was yet another mass shooting, this time at Umpqua Community College in

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<sup>1</sup> The divorce may actually have been after I was born, but I have no memory of every meeting her first husband.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 128:1-4, NRSV.

Roseburg, Oregon, or that yesterday, a Doctors Without Borders trauma center in Afghanistan was bombed by my country, killing 19 people – 12 staff working for the international aid organization and seven patients, including three children – and that a spokesman for U.S. forces in Afghanistan labeled the deaths and destruction as “collateral damage.”<sup>3</sup>

Not only does it feel like it has nothing to do with these events, it’s a disturbing passage. In all honesty, passages like this make me want to borrow Thomas Jefferson’s knife and just remove it from the Bible.

And that’s actually one of the reasons I decided to preach on it. When I find myself angered by or resistant to some scripture, I take it as a sign that I should do some wrestling with it. So I’ve been wrestling with the scripture. And I think, maybe, the scripture is winning.

One of the commentaries I looked at points out, “the prohibition of divorce appears in many early texts of the followers of Jesus ... and may derive from Jesus himself. Some interpreters argue that it was introduced to protect women from being abandoned without support, but there is nothing [overt] in any of these texts to suggest this [is the point Jesus is making]. Further, the Qumran sect also prohibited divorce with the same scriptural argument as here: marriage was ordained at creation.... Among his followers the prohibition of divorce might have addressed the situation of those who were separating for celibacy [and was an argument against that practice<sup>4</sup>].... Biblical law allowed only men to initiate divorce (Deut. 24:1-4), but in this period Jewish women, in accordance with Roman law, also initiated divorces...”<sup>5</sup> In other words, it’s hard to unpack the social context in which this passage was written.

And as I’ve wrestled with it, I realize that I hear it very personally. I hear it personally because of my aunt’s marriage when I was a teen and because of how erased it made me feel as a young adult. And I suspect most of us hear it personally. The end of reading and hearing it so personally is that is that we end up “feeling ashamed or angry or hurt or embarrassed, and that’s totally understandable. Especially if Jesus imagined these words being addressed to individuals.”<sup>6</sup>

But what if he didn’t.

David Lose is of help here. “Note, for instance, how Mark sets up this scene: ‘Some Pharisees came and to test him, said “Is it lawful ...” Did you catch that? This

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<sup>3</sup> Scott Newman and Emma Bowman, “Kunduz Airstrike Reportedly Kills 19 At Doctors Without Borders Hospital,” *National Public Radio: The Two Way*, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/10/03/445435361/after-u-s-airstrike-3-dead-at-doctors-without-borders-hospital> (posted and updated 3 October 2015; accessed 3 October 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Though, I would point out that there is nothing overt in any of this text to suggest this is the point Jesus (or rather Mark) is making.

<sup>5</sup> Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, ed., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 80-81.

<sup>6</sup> David Lose, “Pentecost 19 B: Communities of the Broken and Blessed,” ... *in the Meantime*, <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-19-b-communities-of-the-broken-and-blessed/> (posted and accessed on 28 September 2015).

isn't a casual – or even intense, for that matter – conversation about love, marriage, and divorce. It's a test. Moreover, it's not even a test about divorce, but about the law. There were, you see, several competing schools of thought about the legality of divorce. Not so much about whether divorce was legal – everyone agreed upon that – but rather under what circumstances. And with this question/test, the Pharisees are trying to pin Jesus down, trying to label him, trying to draw him out and perhaps entrap him so that they know better how to deal with him.

“And Jesus is having none of it. He deflects their question away from matters of the law and turns it instead to relationship and, in particular, to God's hope that our relationships are more than legal matters but instead help us to have and share more abundant life. Hence the turn to Genesis: questions of marriage and divorce, he argues, aren't simply a matter of legal niceties, but rather are about the Creator's intention that we be in relationships of mutual dependence and health.”<sup>7</sup>

Now, these Pharisees who are testing Jesus probably don't care about Roman law. They are testing him about Mosaic law. And the fact of the matter is that under Mosaic law, only men could file for divorce and, because of the extreme patriarchal nature of the society, divorce left women pretty much without anything – no status, no reputation, no economic security. Men, Jesus is saying, can't just cast their wives aside – even though it's legal. In fact, the law is meant to protect the vulnerable and the hurting, and every time we use it for another purpose we are twisting it from the Creator's plan and, indeed, violating it in spirit if not in letter.<sup>8</sup>

The Pharisees are trying to test Jesus, to trap him, about the specifics of a law, and Jesus pushes past pedantic arguments. Jesus talks about the purpose of the law. And in doing so, he talks about the kind of community we will be. Jesus is “inviting us to imagine communities centered in and on real relationships; relationships, that is, founded on love and mutual dependence, fostered by respect and dignity, and pursued for the sake of the health of the community and the protection of the vulnerable.”<sup>9</sup>

Another reason I think that Jesus as Mark presents him really isn't focusing on divorce, but on community, is because of the next bit in the lesson, the part about the children. These days, most Bibles get printed like this.

Teaching about Divorce  
(Mt 19:1-9)

**10** He left that place and went to the region of Judea and<sup>d</sup> beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them.

<sup>a</sup>Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “<sup>c</sup>Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

<sup>b</sup>He answered them, “<sup>e</sup>What did Moses command you?” <sup>d</sup>They said, “<sup>e</sup>Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” <sup>f</sup>But Jesus said to them, “<sup>g</sup>Because of your

hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. <sup>h</sup>But from the beginning of creation, ‘God

made them male and female.’ <sup>i</sup>‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be

joined to his wife,<sup>b</sup> and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

<sup>j</sup>Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

<sup>k</sup>Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. <sup>l</sup>He said to them, “<sup>m</sup>Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; <sup>n</sup>and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

Jesus Blesses Little Children  
(Mt 19:13-15; Lk 18:15-17)

<sup>a</sup>People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. <sup>b</sup>But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “<sup>c</sup>Let the

little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God

belongs. <sup>d</sup>Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never

enter it.” <sup>e</sup>And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

You have the scripture translated into English, and the editors have added section headings and they may have decided to put the words attributed to Jesus in red ink to set them off from the other words. Good translations will also have footnotes to point out when the translation is iffy.

The original looked more like this.

<sup>10,1</sup> Καὶ ἐκεῖθεν ἀναστὰς ἔρχεται εἰς τὰ ὄρια τῆς Ἰουδαίας καὶ πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου, καὶ συμπορεύονται πάλιν ὄχλοι πρὸς αὐτόν, καὶ ὡς εἰώθει πάλιν ἐδίδασκεν αὐτούς.  
<sup>2</sup> Καὶ ἐπηρώτων αὐτόν εἰ ἔξεστιν ἀνδρὶ γυναῖκα ἀπολύσαι, πειράζοντες αὐτόν. <sup>3</sup> ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς. Ἐπιτρέψεν Μωϋσῆς; <sup>4</sup> οἱ δὲ εἶπαν. Ἐπέτρεψεν Μωϋσῆς βιβλίον ἀποστασίου γράψαι καὶ ἀπολύσαι. <sup>5</sup> ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς. Πρὸς τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν ἔγραψεν ὑμῖν τὴν ἐντολὴν ταύτην. <sup>6</sup> ἀπὸ δὲ ἀρχῆς κτίσεως ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς. <sup>7</sup> ἔνεκεν τούτου καταλείψει ἄνθρωπος τὸν πατέρα αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν μητέρα καὶ προσκολληθήσεται πρὸς τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, <sup>8</sup> καὶ ἔσονται οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν· ὥστε οὐκέτι εἰσὶν δύο ἀλλὰ μία σὰρξ. <sup>9</sup> ὁ οὖν ὁ θεὸς συνέζευξεν ἄνθρωπος μὴ χωριζέτω.  
<sup>10</sup> Καὶ εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν πάλιν οἱ μαθηταὶ περὶ τούτου ἐπηρώτων αὐτόν. <sup>11</sup> καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς. Ὁς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλον μοιχᾶται ἐπ’ αὐτήν, <sup>12</sup> καὶ ἐὰν αὐτὴ ἀπολύσασα τὸν ἄνδρα αὐτῆς γαμήσῃ ἄλλον μοιχᾶται.  
<sup>13</sup> Καὶ προσέφερον αὐτῷ παιδία ἵνα αὐτῶν ἀψηται· οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ ἐπετίμησαν αὐτοῖς. <sup>14</sup> Ἰδὼν δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἠγανάκτησεν καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς. Ἄφετε τὰ παιδία ἔρχεσθαι πρὸς με, μὴ κωλύετε αὐτά, τῶν γὰρ τοιούτων ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ. <sup>15</sup> ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ὅς ἂν μὴ δέξῃται τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς παιδίον, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃ εἰς αὐτήν. <sup>16</sup> καὶ ἐναγκαλισάμενος αὐτὰ κατευλόγητι τὴν τὰς χεῖρας ἐπ’ αὐτά.

Not only is it in Greek, you’ll notice that the section headings are missing. That’s because the authors didn’t include them. For the authors, the writing was one whole. Even what you see here has editorial additions. The originals didn’t even have chapter and verse numbers. The oldest manuscripts don’t even have punctuation and capitalization is completely inconsistent.

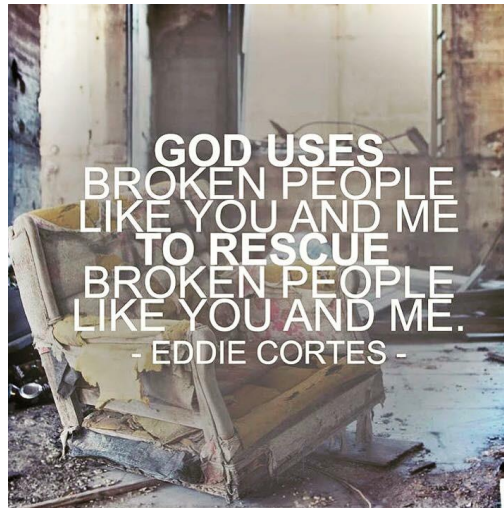
For our ears, the narrative in Mark seems to shift. Jesus was talking about divorce and now he’s talking about children. No wonder editors put in a new section heading. But Mark didn’t have the section headings. There’s a reason the admonition about including children comes right after the test about the law. Jesus’ reaction to the two situations is essentially the same.

“Let’s recall the context: Jesus has announced his intention to go to Jerusalem to die and, in response, his disciples argue about who is the greatest. Jesus in turn tells them that to be great is to serve, and that the very heart of the kingdom he proclaims is about welcoming the vulnerable. In fact, he says that whenever you welcome and honor a child – one who had the least status and power in the ancient world – you were actually welcoming and honoring Jesus. Now, on the heels of this conversation about the purpose of the law, some folks bring their children to be blessed and the disciples try to keep them away. And Jesus intervenes, forcefully, saying that welcoming the kingdom pretty much means welcoming children, that is, the vulnerable, those at risk, and those in need.

“This whole passage, I think, is about community. But it’s not the kind of community we’ve been trained to seek. It’s not, that is, a community of the strong, or the wealthy, or the powerful, or the independent. Rather, this is a community of the broken, of the vulnerable, of those at risk. It’s a community, in other words, of those who know their need and seek to be in relationship with each other because they have learned that by being in honest and open relationship with each other they are in relationship with God, the very one who created them for each other in

the first place. This is what the church was originally about – a place for all those who had been broken by life or rejected by the powerful and who came to experience God through the crucified Jesus as the One who met them precisely in their vulnerability, not to make them impervious to harm but rather open to the brokenness and need of those around them.”<sup>10</sup>

Maybe this quote should have been on the cover of our bulletin today: “God uses broken people like you and me to rescue broken people like you and me.”<sup>11</sup>



“Part of being human is to be insecure, to be aware of our need ... [T]o be broken is, in fact, to be human. And to be human is to be loved by God and drawn together into relationship with all the others that God loves. Which means that our gatherings on Sundays are local gatherings of the broken and loved, of those who are hurting but also healing, of those who are lost but have also been found, of those that know their need and seek not simply to have those needs met but have realized that in helping meet the needs of others their own are met in turn.”<sup>12</sup>

When Mark quotes Jesus about divorce, these words are based in the values that embrace us despite – maybe even because of – our brokenness. These are Jesus’ family values. And in the light of the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, and in the light of World Communion Sunday, and in the shadow of the mass shooting at Umpqua Community College, and in the shadow of the bombing of the Doctors Without Borders hospital in Afghanistan, I need to be reminded of Jesus’ family values: that we are a family of broken people rescuing broken people.

And there are plenty of broken people who need us.

Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Eddie Cortes is a pastor; he blogs at <http://eddiecortes.com>.

<sup>12</sup> David Lose, *op. cit.*, spelling error corrected.