

**“This is About That”<sup>1</sup> • Mark 10:2 – 16**  
**Sheth LaRue • October 8, 2018**  
**Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary**

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A little over twelve years ago I was driving south on the AlCan highway, making the drive from Alaska back to Colorado where I would have divorce papers waiting for me. The 3300 miles were spent without any human contact other than a superficial gas station conversation or a waitress describing the Canadian delicacy known as poutine. While mine was a rather hastily-moving marriage, I had still taken the vows I made to my wife and my God seriously; but it wasn't a match made in heaven, and I was informed of this when I was told I needed to move out and I left Anchorage broke, heartbroken, and alone.

It's difficult for you to see, but this is a little carved stick in my hand and it's pictured on the handout I've given you. This stick isn't much – it's not very fancy and has absolutely no value. It's just something I whittled away at along my journey. To you, it's a stick. To me, it's a reminder of that trip I took and all the emotions wrapped up in that seven day drive – fear, embarrassment, failure, and worthlessness. It's a stick, but it's more than a stick. This physical thing – this stick – is actually about that journey, about that relationship, about that moment in time. *This is actually about that.*

The words of our passage this morning are about divorce and the treatment of children, but as God is apt to do, it's more complex than that. Our passage this morning is about how we should be in relation to one another as spouses, as friends, as community members, as children of God. Jesus knew that the Pharisees and the disciples understood the law, he knew their mindset, and he knew they were looking for a specific answer. They had an agenda and had a question to be answered. But this was a moment for more than a simple answer, more than an interpretation of the law. This was a moment for Jesus to speak truth and blow open the ideas of marriage, divorce, of people living in relationship. Jesus knew *this* was actually about *that*.

The Pharisees knew the law and repeated it to Jesus at his bequest: a *man* could divorce a woman. A *man* could leave when he chose. A *man* could divorce because his wife was unfaithful, because his wife was a poor cook, or because she wasn't as pretty as someone else.

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<sup>1</sup> Phrase and overarching idea from: Rob Bell, *Sex God: Exploring the Endless Connections Between Sexuality and Spirituality* (New York: Harper One, 2012), vii – xiv.

And the rights of the wife? She could not initiate divorce for any reason, and if her husband were to divorce her she would be left penniless, homeless, and hungry.<sup>2</sup> The man has the upper hand in this culture, in this time, in this place.

Jesus countered the Pharisees in his response and brought a new message which went beyond male-only rights and subverted the culture's patriarchal assumptions about marriage. Jesus quoted Genesis 1:27 – "God made them male and female" and reaffirmed that God created man and woman *at the same time* – no hierarchy of gender, no patriarchy, but equality. And he went on further, quoting Genesis 2:24, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." The *man* left home to be joined with his wife, not as two separate individuals but as one body. Jesus' answer wasn't to merely supply wisdom; his answer was to give women equal footing in marriage and in divorce.

The disciples wanted more, though, as Jesus didn't actually answer the Pharisee's question of whether or not divorce was lawful. Again, Jesus pointed them to the truth – but it wasn't the truth they expected. He said that when either party – man or woman – gets divorced and is remarried, they commit adultery. But culpability isn't his main concern. Jesus was reiterating the *this of that* – equality and oneness in relationships, not yours and mine but ours.

And later on, as the little children were coming to Jesus the disciples were chasing them away. The disciples' interpretation of the scriptures were decidedly anti-child. Children had no place and no right to be there because they were "...willful, lacking in understanding, and in need of stern discipline."<sup>3</sup> As the gate-keepers to their rabbi, the disciples were acting on their understanding of where children should be. Jesus responds to the disciples with indignation because they still didn't understand that the Kingdom of God was where all are welcome and all are equal.

In this Marcan moment, Jesus was addressing the problems put before him in his context and in his time, but his larger vision – which was applicable then – is applicable today. Jesus' teachings are more than divorce. They're more than marriage. They're more than the treatment of children. Jesus' words are about the nature of community life and of just relations between persons. His words are spoken to those who are vulnerable to abuses of power.

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<sup>2</sup> C. Clifton Black, "Exegetical Perspective in Mark 10:2-16" in *Feasting on the Word - Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 145.

<sup>3</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, "Exegetical Perspective in Mark 10:13-16" in *Feasting on the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 305.

How often has this passage from Mark been used to abuse power? How often has it been linked to the idea of the ‘sanctity of marriage’ and all that that phrase encapsulates? How often have Jesus’ words been used to keep people out, instead of bring in? Same-sex couples in long term relationships wondering why their commitment cannot be recognized as valid. Senior citizens who, if they were to get married, would face serious financial consequences. Children from broken homes who, as adults, are wary of commitment.<sup>4</sup> Jesus’ words, when taught correctly, should welcome these people and their relationships; Jesus’ words should welcome all into the community of the vulnerable, the neglected, the abused.

Does God oppose divorce? Certainly – because divorce hurts people, causes rifts between families, and it isn’t the divine intention. But! But, God loves us more and recognizes that our love has faults; God understands that our marriages don’t always work; God acknowledges that safety and security is more important than holding an abusive marriage together. God recognizes that those who are oppressed and vulnerable in a marriage need a way out.

God is less concerned about what is allowed and more concerned about what is intended in the Kingdom. The Pharisees and the disciples expected Jesus to go in one direction and answer their questions. But Jesus reframed their thinking and told them *this* is about *that*. Jesus is speaking to the community of the vulnerable, of the broken, of the oppressed. Jesus is speaking to us in our poverty, in our depression, in our youthfulness, in our old age, in our queerness. Jesus is speaking to those who experience racism, misogyny, brokenness, and abuse. We are that community who knows and desires to be in relation with one another and with God.

Dearly beloved, we have received an invitation to see our communities as places where God is working to restore the whole of creation, not by taking away our problems and solving all the issues, but by bringing us together to understand and care for one another. We are the broken and unwell whom God loves. And the Divine is not only healing and restoring us, but is using us to make all things new. May we proclaim the good news: *this* is about *that*.

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Jane Kerr Cornell, “Pastoral Perspective on Mark 10:1-12” in *Feasting on the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 298.