

It's a Trap - Rev. Denise Stone

Text: Mark 10:2-16

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² Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” ³ He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” ⁴ They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” ⁵ But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶ But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

¹⁰ Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹ He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

¹³ People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.ⁱ

The Word of the Lord Thanks be to God.



It's a trap! is a line from *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*. The character Admiral Ackbar (Erik Bauersfeld), while engaging an ambush on an enemy weapon, is informed that enemy ships have arrived. Realizing that the enemy army must be aware of their plans and prepared to defend itself, he exclaims "It's a trap!"

No, this Sermon is not about Star Wars. It *is* about a trap, however.

In the text I just read, Jesus is being set-up by the Pharisees. They want Jesus to weigh in on a topic that was a hot-button issue for the Jewish faith as well as implicating Rome (think John the Baptist preaching against the royal family for adultery) – it was a trap.

The trap was that there were different factions within Judaism that saw the issue of divorce differently. Some felt it was permissible for men to divorce women, others felt it was never okay.

The Pharisees thought that regardless of how Jesus responded to their question about divorce, he was going to offend someone or some group.

Perhaps they even hoped that he would say something that would get him the same result as John the Baptist.

This text is also a trap today. When this text comes up it might be interesting to see how the preacher handles it. I mean it is still a controversial subject. Some might expect a hardline that divorce is never okay or that this text speaks to same-sex relationships, etc.

The trap, however, is that taking a hardline would be falling for the same trap the Pharisees set up for Jesus.

The key to understanding this passage is context.

The last three weeks we have explored Jesus' teaching his followers about what it means to be a disciple.

Children have played a role in many of those conversations.

Today's passage ends with children playing a prominent role again.

In addition to children, we continue with the movement of Jesus and his disciples towards Jerusalem and towards the cross.

If you back up today's text to include verse 1, you see that Jesus and his disciples have left Capernaum in Galilee and are now in Judea and the area beyond the Jordan.

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

He is still teaching them. His intent is the same – he is preparing them for being a disciple AFTER his death and resurrection.

One difference this time is that Pharisees are in the crowd.

As I pointed out, the Pharisees bring a controversial topic to Jesus in an attempt to trick him. It's a trap.

Jesus, however, does not fall for the trap. He turns the question back on them.

What did Moses command you?"⁴ They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.

Jesus then takes the answer and moves it from the law to God's intention at creation. God's intention is for lasting, intimate relationships.

Jesus acknowledges that humans have failed, and that divorce is a reality.

Jesus actually expands divorce to include women initiating them – which was not an allowed Jewish practice during Jesus' lifetime. Only Jewish men could get a divorce. Jesus extends care here to those without power – women.

Moving to verses 13-16, we see people (they are not identified) bringing children to Jesus to be blessed.

The disciples, who evidently haven't been paying much attention to Jesus' teachings about children, try to shoo them away. Jesus has much more important things to be doing.

Jesus isn't having any of the disciples' nonsense.

¹³ People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Jesus again is pointing out that children, the weak and powerless, are to be the role models for belonging to the Kingdom of God.

This whole passage – marriage, divorce and children – is about the Kingdom of God.

Does God intend for marriages that God put together to end? No. Does that mean that marriages will not end? No.

Human beings are limited creatures. We struggle. We fail.

The area of relationships, all relationships, are full of the potential for failure.

Do we ignore God's plans for relationships just because we know the vast number of them that have failed? Of course not.

We do need to give ourselves and others the same grace and mercy extended to us by God.

A professor I've quoted in the past, Karoline Lewis, has this to say about this whole passage,

In the end, when Jesus debates the Pharisees, he appeals to a greater law, the law of God's creation. Can Jesus really do this? It most certainly causes the Pharisees to wonder about their own interpretations of God's law, but it should also create some squirming in our own sometimes self-righteous shoes. If we are honest with ourselves, we are constantly negotiating human tradition and experience in the context of determining God's will. The issue of divorce is no different.

We would also do well to remember that the designated passage for this Sunday does not end at 10:12. Instead, we have the brief story in 10:13-16 of people bring children to Jesus, an act the disciples try desperately to curtail. To what extent is the question "to whom does the Kingdom of God belong" (10:14) at the heart of the test posed by the Pharisees? Is the

issue at stake less about divorce and symptomatic of the larger subject of vulnerability?ⁱⁱ

If the issue at stake is more the subject of vulnerability, what do we take away from today?

The Pharisees wanted a bright-line rule, a law, they could impose on others (and if it got Jesus in trouble, well all the better).

Jesus instead talks about God.

Jesus speaks in more strict terms than even the Pharisees imagined. Jesus does not, however, replace a law with a new stricter law. Jesus appeals to creation and how God intended for relationships to be healthy.

Ultimately, however, Jesus recognizes that it takes a gentle and merciful spirit, like that of a child, to enter the Kingdom of God.

Divorce is not a determining factor on who gets in.

Marriage is not a determining factor on who gets in.

Quoting Professor Lewis again,

Those persons on the edges of humanity, women and children, and for Mark, any outsider, marginalized by ritual, tradition, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, will find their place in the Kingdom of God. The reality of divorce, of not being married, of not having children, has made all of us outsiders for a time. I wonder if Jesus calling us back to the created order is not simply to hold up an ideal vision of the perfect relationship, but to

remind us that to be human is to be in relationship, whatever that relationship might look like. To be marginalized is to be alone.ⁱⁱⁱ

Our society is not the same as existed at the time of Jesus. Yet our need to be in relationship is the same.

Relationships are messy. We are messy.

Yet God still extends the invitation to be part of the Kingdom.

That invitation is what today is all about – World Communion Sunday.

A day in which we recognize that the Kingdom of God is bigger than this church or the churches of our country.

The Kingdom of God is offered to all who will accept it.

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ⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-27-2/commentary-on-mark-102-16>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.