

Religious de-Baiting – Mark 10: 2-16
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
For First Central Congregational UCC Omaha, Nebraska
October 4, 2009

This scripture passage of Jesus addressing the question of “divorce” is a passage that I have been successful at avoiding during all my years of preaching. I suspect my avoidance was grounded in real-life issues. A large number of people sitting in the pews every Sunday are folks who have had to deal with the sting of broken marriage relationships. For many of those people, as is true with many of you, the divorce was their own. I can’t believe there is a person alive in our culture who has not had to deal with marriage ending relationships either personally, a loved one, or a close friend. That, in itself, is probably a good reason to address it from the pulpit. However, too often I fear what is said about the words of Jesus found in Mark 10, are usually anything but helpful, caring, and comforting. His words seem more like a message of condemnation to suffering people than an expression of empathy and hope.

I am going to take what I believe is not an unfair liberty, and declare that these words of Jesus are about more than marriage and divorce. His words are of far greater significance than what happens in a marriage relationship. His words reflect the damage and reasons why any relationship falls into disrepair. His words are broader than what might first appear.

The world we live in is filled with damaged and non-repairable differences on many levels. All too often, while Jesus’ words are taken literally and legalistically as a tool for a moral stand about the marriage relationship, those same words are ignored or even considered irrelevant to the larger crumbling that goes on all around us.

- What about the divorce between people over religious ideologies? I am afraid the truth is that there have been far more schisms within the Church than unifications. A hundred years ago a group of people within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) said “it is unbiblical to have any musical sounds within the church that do not come from the human voice.” Organs and pianos were removed, and that group is affectionately referred to as “the inorganic church.” The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are both facing divisions and schisms, and

may well divorce from each other over the issue of the ordination of gay and lesbian people.

- Palestinians and Jews are connected by ancient blood, but long ago divorced each other, and today it is reflected in rage and violence toward each other.
- Jews, Muslims, and Christians also come out of common ties through Abraham, but are completely divorced from one another. Don't be dismayed, it is not only religious ideologies that have or are divorcing. Nations do it all the time and no one holds Jesus' words before the leaders and populations of nations as a moral finger pointing as it is done with a marriage.
- Surely each of you must have seen the John Birch Society highway signs that have littered the road sides for years and demand our nation to get out of the United Nations. It is a divorce decree because other nations have the potential of altering what some declare as "our God-given right" to do what ever we darn well please regardless of how harmful it is to any other nation or people. In my own lifetime, our nation has done this many times.
- 70 years ago we saw what happened in Europe and Asia when nations effectively said to other nations, "you are standing in our way of doing what we want to do, therefore we will divorce and defeat you."

Don't be dismayed, it happens in other settings as well.

Though Mark does not clarify who asked Jesus the question, it was most likely a person who wanted to bait Jesus into a trap. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Jesus was familiar with the law the questioner asked. Jewish cannon law made it possible for a Jewish man to divorce with something as simple as a written divorce decree. Men had all the power and women had nearly no power. The law was made to give advantage to men. Women were not in a marriage relationship as we are familiar with today. Women were considered property, and whenever a man no longer wanted his "property," for whatever reason, all he needed to do was write a writ. Here is where it becomes a big problem – men kept all the resources such as money and the women, unless they had a father, brother, or some other man in the family, were left to fend for themselves. The men got on with their lives rarely missing a beat, a meal, or a day at work. Since women

were essentially “non-people,” the only way many could survive was through prostitution.

Here is where Jesus becomes harsh, and it has nothing to do with irreconcilable differences, it was about the “hardness of heart” that the law allowed the men to have. The law made it possible for a man to say to his wife, “my way or the highway.” It is a “hardness of heart” that is the same that religious bodies and nations exhibit when they say to a neighbor or congregant, “we don’t like you any more and since we are bigger, stronger, and control all the assets, do it my way or we divorce and you will not like what I can do.”

Jesus’ words seem so simple, and direct, and clarifies right/wrong, good/bad, and black/white, and that makes people feel either very good and smug about their entrenched positions, or terribly uneasy because of real life.

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” It was a bait question to Jesus and it is a bait question to any Christian. Jesus also said:

“Come to me, all who are weary and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11: 28-30).

Those are the words that need to be held as a light to the question of “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife.” Jesus was not about being hard-hearted. He was always most concerned about the ignored, the abused, those treated unfairly or cruelly. He did not point a finger with condemnation at people suffering from a relationship that ended. He pointed a finger at people, any people, who have power and strength, and use it for their own pleasures, desires, or gains with disregard for those who are not powerful and strong. The ways of God are not about gaining advantage or tipping the scales in ones favor at the expense of short-changing someone else. That is what he pointed a finger at. Jesus would not take their bait. He de-baited their question and told them that God expects more of all of us than hard-heartedness that leads to nothing more than our own personal gain and harm to others, and that is as Jesus as it gets.

Amen.