

A Greater Mercy

Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 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. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. Mark 10:2-16

Women are property and children are useless and unimportant. A man has the right to dismiss his wife with a handwritten note for an offense as simple as burning the beans she was preparing for supper. And children, especially children without families to protect them, are left in the streets to make their way in life as best as they can; left to live or die, destined to beg and scrounge for food and shelter. These are offensive notions to our modern ears and we reject them both. They are equally offensive, it appears, to Jesus and he is rejecting not only these cultural norms, but he is calling us to remember that God's hope for humankind is found not in the letter of the law, but in the deep and abiding memory of God's creative and life-giving love. So, if you have ever been divorced or if someone you love has suffered this heartbreak, be not afraid; Jesus is not in any way shape or form compounding your heartache with the threat of condemnation or rejection by God. Unscrupulous and punishing religions and ill-informed preachers might tell you so, but it is simply not true. Jesus' difficult confrontation with the religious authorities is in fact a massive repudiation of his culture's ill treatment of women and their children. And he reminds these learned men that God has a better plan. In God's plan the human creatures were made as a gift for one another so that they need never face life alone without a helper or know the excruciating fear of feeling all alone in the world. They were created as equal partners knit together with a bond so strong that to rip it apart was like tearing limb from limb and bone from bone. The authorities seek to test Jesus and trap him in a teaching that they could use against him, but instead he calls their whole social order into question and reminds them that before the law turned women into little more than livestock, God had held them in much higher esteem. And Jesus' conversation with his disciples about the little children might seem unrelated, but in fact Jesus is still beating the same drum. These little children suffered much the way the women did and Jesus' point to his disciples is clear and sharp; in the kingdom of God, such as these little ones are as important as any male, any rich person, or any religious authority. What initially sounds like a strict, perhaps harsh prohibition against divorce followed by a sentimental moment of Jesus welcoming the little children is, in point of fact, a radical and subversive social revolution. His teaching totally upends both the legal and cultural presuppositions his world held about women and children.

Jesus' hard teaching is about far more than the legality of divorce. Likewise, Jesus' reminder of God's original blessing of human union was not simply about two people. Jesus was offering a profound statement about how interconnected the whole human family really is. This is where his teaching about divorce touches both our world and our church. Divorce is not just about dissolving a marital union. Divorce is about all of those places in life where we have taken our eyes off of God's hope for us and have failed to recognize each other as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." These are the places in our world where we tear and unbind, sometimes mercilessly, at the ties God forged between us all at the foundation of creation, the ties that bind us in love as the human family. This is our struggle as we watch the painful realities of the world. It is easy to divorce ourselves from pain that is happening somewhere else. We are not hard-hearted people, but the world's pain, when combined with our own is simply overwhelming. As we struggle to maintain an attitude of hope, we often resort to ignoring the hunger and disease in so many parts of the human family. As our unchecked hunger for wealth and certainty increases, so does the ever-widening division between those who have and those who have not. Jesus' return to the beginning of all things also reminds us of the abuse that we often heap on the natural world, divorcing ourselves from our deep ties with the God's natural order. We plunder and pollute the earth with no regard for future generations. Our world suffers from divorce of all kinds. But it is precisely that broken world to which Jesus comes. He asks us to keep fidelity with hope so that ultimately, we might end divorces of all kinds and heal all of us who suffer from the pain of division. This is God's greater mercy. Jesus asks us to recognize once again that we truly belong to each other, we belong to the world we call home, and we belong utterly to a God who has, for all eternity, refused to divorce us.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+