

**Yr. B, Proper 22**  
**October 7, 2018**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1494 Words**

**Lessons:      Genesis 2:18-24**  
**Psalm 8**  
**Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12**  
**Mark 10:2-16**

Is it legal for a man to divorce his wife? Inquiring Pharisees *pretend* to want to know. St. Mark tells us they really just wanted to *test* Jesus. Of course they did...because the answer is a clear and simple 'yes.'

According to the ancient Law of Israel a man can easily and lawfully divorce his wife. You can look it up in Deuteronomy chapter 24. A man can write a certificate of divorce and put it into his wife's hand for no other reason than this: "If she does not please him or because he finds something objectionable about her."

For men who like simple answers, it doesn't get any better than that! You see, the Law of Moses established justification a mile wide for the privileged gender—males. At the same time the Law of Moses *failed* to offer protection—even an inch deep—for the vulnerable gender—females.

If you don't remember anything else about this Gospel lesson, remember this: Jesus found this legal arrangement absolutely unacceptable. He flat out rejected the traditional, religious, legal standard that granted a monumental preference for men at the expense of women.

We're going to do some bible study this morning, because this is incredibly relevant here and now as much as it was there and then. While there have been many improvements over three thousand years, we have not yet arrived at equal rights or protections or credibility for women—in this country or most anywhere else. Sadly, this assessment applies as much to the Church (if not more) than in other parts of society.

The Diocese of Kansas just made news for having three women candidates for bishop. God bless them, but the fact that this is news is a hint that we have not yet arrived. We *might* have arrived when having female slates for bishop elections seems as normal as having completely male slates has seemed for 2000 years.

And—let's face it—the Episcopal Church is miles ahead of most other branches in the Jesus Movement when it comes to recognizing *and trusting* the voices and the authority of women. The gold standard will *always be* the trust Jesus placed exclusively in the voice and authority of Mary Magdalene to proclaim his resurrection.

Now, let's get back to this kerfuffle with the Pharisees!

I want you to notice that Jesus uses one part of Holy Scripture to challenge another part of Holy Scripture. Jesus quotes from the creation story of Genesis in order to overturn the legal understanding from Deuteronomy. This is a very rare occasion when Jesus argues that the Law of Moses should be interpreted *more strenuously* rather than less. Simply put, he raises the bar for men. *And therefore*, he deepens the protections for women.

"How does he do that?" you ask. He does it by reminding all of us that God created them, male *and* female. In other words, the woman is every bit as much of God's creation as the man. Her personhood is not contingent upon a husband.

For the dull witted, Jesus presses on to make his point even more strongly. "This is the reason," he says, "that a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife." Do you hear that? Jesus describes a clear break—a 'divorce' if you will—from the man's family of origin in order for him to join his wife and become a new creation.

Translation: the wife is just as respectable, complete, and sufficient as the father and mother have been. The act of marriage is not a diminishing step downward, it is a creative step forward.

Now, for the positively stubborn remnant of Pharisees, Jesus drives home his *new interpretation* of marriage and divorce with a third point: “When (the man is) joined to his wife, ...the two shall become one flesh.” There it is in plain language, spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ: The woman and the man are one.

Let me help you by elaborating in the spirit of what I think Jesus is saying: The woman and the man are one *and the same*—bone of bone, flesh of flesh. And *this begs the question*—why *should* the law of divorce give so much preference to the male? It shouldn’t. In God’s eyes...in the eyes of Jesus, male and female are both divinely created as free and full persons in the image of God.

When I conduct marriage counseling and pre-marital counseling, I am looking for evidence that both persons believe this—about *themselves* and about the *other person*. Do both persons view themselves as well as their beloved to be free and full persons made in the image of God? I’m asking myself, “Is there a fully realized ‘two-ness’ to serve as a foundation for a creative, just, peaceful, and loving ‘one-ness?’”

The Episcopal Church did a great thing in 1928—not in the 50’s, or the 60’s, or in the Prayer Book of 1979, but in 1928. You know what we did? We struck the word ‘obey’ from the woman’s wedding vow. The ’28 prayer book ushered in a robust understanding of mutuality in healthy relationships, and that begins with identical, mutual vows for each free and full person who is made in the image of God. Our theology of marriage is grounded in the same creation story that Jesus referenced in this argument against the Pharisees for more equitable rights, protections, and respect for women.

One of the subtle things we don’t notice about Jesus’ re-interpretation of marriage and divorce happens when he speaks privately to his disciples later that day. “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another (person), she commits adultery.”

First of all, the Law of Moses did not provide for women to divorce their husbands and remarry. The fact that Jesus even *contemplates* that possibility reflects his view—supported by Roman Law—that women did have full agency to make these choices.

Secondly, when Jesus says that a man who divorces his wife and remarries *is the one who commits adultery*, he once again turns the Law of Moses upside down. You see, in Deuteronomy 24 the case law concerns a woman who is divorced not by one man, but by two. And in this case, the Mosaic Law prohibits the first man—under any circumstance—to take that woman back because *she* has been defiled.

Clearly, Jesus found this notion of a ‘defiled woman’ to be abhorrent. It will not square with an understanding that women as well as men are free and full persons, endowed with the image of God.

I think Jesus is saying that women or men can defile themselves if they choose. But nobody else can defile you against your will, no matter what.

Like Jesus, we live in an age of Pharisees. We live in a time that is testing the deeply compassionate views of Jesus about vulnerable people. We live in a time when there is so much hardness of heart.

So, remember this Gospel truth—from the beginning of time, God made us, male and female. From the beginning of time, God inspired us, male and female. From the beginning of time, God endowed us, male and female, with freedom to fully develop into the compassionate image of God. By his teaching and his example, Jesus has taught us what is good.

Today's Gospel is not just about marriage or divorce or even the little children whom Jesus blesses. Today's Gospel is about valuing people—and especially vulnerable people—even above tradition. Today's Gospel is about valuing the 'oneness' of marriage because of the God-given dignity of *both persons* who are joined together.

Our blessing—every Sunday—for those who celebrate the gift of marriage is that *each person* may continue to love, honor, and cherish the other in faithfulness and patience, in wisdom and true godliness (so) that their home may be a haven—a harbor, a refuge—of blessing and peace. When I place my hands on each person who comes forward to receive God's blessing, I press down a little bit. It is a gentle reminder of the weight of love that each person bears with (and for) the other.

Here's the thing I want all of us to take away this morning—whether we are married or not or divorced or not. The covenant of marriage also represents the spiritual unity between Christ and his Church. Well, we know the weight of love that Christ has borne for us. So, the question for the Church is this:

What weight of love are we willing to bear for Christ's sake? How will you show the love of Christ in faithfulness and patience? How will you honor Christ in wisdom and true godliness?

One way we do this is by respecting the dignity of *every* human being...like Jesus does.

Amen.