

Sermon
Kirk of St James
Sunday October 6, 2024
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

A few weeks ago, I finished reading a book called “A Well-Trained Wife” by Tia Levings. It chronicles the story of Tia’s life shaped by her experiences first in the southern Baptist church, and then consecutively more conservative and evangelical churches. The problem was as her husband moved them from church to church and stricter beliefs Tia was being abused, mentally, physically, and sexually. Early on she went to the church and her pastor for help and instead of finding comfort or an ally was told that if those things were happening she was simply not being obedient enough, and if she was it wouldn’t happen. Occasionally she was also told it was God testing her and she simply had to submit. This put her in a spiral of escalating abuse until finally one night her husband left out of the blue, and she felt a voice telling her to run, so she gathered up her four children and left in the darkness. She later found out her husband had went to retrieve a gun from his work place and was on his way home. Her and her children barely escaped. When we hear stories like this, and then come up against passages like we do in Mark this morning, it is good to take time to parse them out, otherwise we could end up perpetuating cycles of abuse, or implying it is better for people to suffer than find wholeness of life.

At this point in time in the book of Mark large crowds have been gathering to listen to Jesus’s teachings. There are some religious authorities who are getting nervous about this and looking for ways to discredit or trap Jesus. This particular passage is one such example, where they ask a question hoping Jesus gives a contrary answer so they can

exploit it. The same thing happens when the Pharisees ask if they should pay taxes to the emperor and we have the “render unto Caesar what is Caesar and unto God what is God’s.” We know all too well how in our modern world an answer to a question in an interview, or a sound clip used out of context can spell disaster for a reputation, a campaign, or image. Jesus knows people are trying to entrap him and often turns the questions back on the interviewer so as not to become mired in something he did not say or did not believe. This is why he asks them what Moses commanded in the law. They admit Moses said a man could write a certificate of dismissal for divorce and the conversation goes from there.

There is another possible and far less biblical reason for the Pharisees to ask a question about marriage. Currently they are down by the Jordan river in the wilderness, the same place John the Baptist carried out his ministry. John was not sent to prison and consequently lost his head (literally) because of his teaching around the messiah. He was killed because he criticized Herod Antipas for marrying his brother's wife. The Pharisees were most likely hoping for a soundbite they could run back to Herod with in the hopes Jesus would meet a similar fate. The discussion happening here is not meant to be a new teaching about law/divorce/remarriage. Jesus is being tested specifically on the legality of divorce, and hoping he says something they can take back to Herod.

Another problem that could arise out of divorce in the ancient world is how vulnerable it made women in particular. A man could issue a certificate of divorce for less than compelling reasons, and the woman lost all rights. “She could easily find herself

begging for food on the street or prostituting herself for income. Clearly, Jesus had a pastoral concern for women who could have their lives torn apart by a signature on a piece of paper. In the kingdom of God, there should be a mutual respect and concern for each other, not a quick certificate of divorce.” “Both Jesus and Mark addressed a culture that did not provide a safety net for women after they were divorced: neither alimony nor any legal means of recourse.” They simply lost everything, and had no where to turn.

Another challenge of this passage is the serious pastoral care concerns it raises related to those who are divorced, remarried, as well as any gender identity other than cisgender. This passage in Mark is about the legality of divorce during a specific moment in history, and it relies on the definition of marriage as practiced and understood in ancient Israelite culture. “The Pharisees test Jesus with a specific question about the legality of divorce. In response to the question, Jesus offers his teaching.” To apply it further outside the scope of this would not be helpful.

After all this discussion we have the further addition of Jesus’ teachings on children which just feels jarring after the previous narrative. However, “at the heart of this text is the disruptive work of God in Jesus Christ, which overturns patriarchal marital relationships and elevates those at the bottom of the social ladder (children) into models for entering the kingdom.”

While subtle Jesus also empowers women through his affirmations. When the Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce it is only men who could ask for divorce—not women. Yet by the end of the text Jesus asserts women’s right to divorce their husband. Women are

given precisely the same rights and responsibilities as men. Similarly, children, who are the least valued and most vulnerable members of society, are welcomed by Jesus, blessed by him, and offered as models for receiving God's kingdom. Jesus' teaching and actions here are revolutionary, subverting both cultural and legal presuppositions about women and children."

By the end of the text Jesus is affirming the inherent value of all people. Within the kingdom of God ideally all our relationships would be based on justice, love and peace. While that is the benchmark we know we do not live in a world where that is our constant reality. Most Protestant denominations at this point in time would agree that some relationships need to end in order for people to be safe, healthy, and to live full lives. One of the things that haunted me after finishing the book by Tia Leving was the idea that she felt she deserved to suffer. God means for ALL people to have rich and full lives, not just some people. All people are beloved by God, all people are worthy of God's love, and from the smallest child up, all people have value because they are God's.