

“Dynamic Doctrine” – Mk 10:2-16 – Oct 4/09

I had the opportunity to attend General Assembly this year in June in Hamilton. I wasn't scheduled to go this year, but since few others wanted to go to Hamilton in June the Clerk eventually got down the rotation list to me, and I agreed to go. On the one hand I don't mind Hamilton – I used to live next door in Burlington, loved the fish and chips on the “beach strip” connecting the two – and on the other hand being kind of a church “junkie” I enjoy General Assembly. There wasn't much this year that was too controversial apart from the expected flap over what was considered an “over generous” raise for the staff at 50 Wynford, which kind of fizzled. There was, however, a great deal of chatter over the Church Doctrine report on marriage ... and it didn't even go near the issue of same-sex marriage, dealing mostly with the issue of whether or not the church should stop being agents of the state performing a recording function and just concentrate on the worship service aspect of a wedding ceremony.

Much the same kind of long and intense discussion was averted at the last Presbytery meeting as our local Church Doctrine Committee brought in – after three or more years of arguing – a report, which was deferred to the November meeting because of the lateness of the hour. It promises to be a long meeting in November! Any discussion of marriage and related issues seems to be a highly contentious issue in the church, creating deep and polarized divisions. It seems, however, that this is not a new phenomenon, as we see in our reading from Mark today.

Today's text from Mark's gospel presents a significant challenge. This of course is one of the texts that has been and continues to be wielded as a weapon, not only in the controversial issue of same-sex marriage but in discussions about marriage and divorce in all situations. It is difficult to work with this text at least in part because so many people grab only a portion of it at face value, not only failing to look any deeper into what was said but being horrified even at the suggestion of looking deeper.

In part people's reluctance to look deeper comes from the discovery that when you do actually bother to read and to hear what the text is really saying, the message is quite different from – perhaps even the opposite of – the apparent message you might get from a quick or simplistic glance.

Let's dig a little deeper, let's look at what is actually happening in these two encounters, one between Jesus and the Pharisees, and the other between Jesus and his disciples. Even the setting, “the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan” sets a tone for these encounters. This would roughly be the equivalent here of saying, “out past Cloverdale, into the heart of the bible belt”, into an area where scripture is taken literally, even if not seriously. The crowds gathered around him, ‘again’ we are told, and as usual ‘again’ he taught them. All seems normal, all appear as usual.

And then some Pharisees, those masters of the legalistic nit-pick, ask Jesus a trick question, testing him, seeing if he will provide an answer that they can use against him. (That's a practice that seems to have continued unabated, as there is no shortage of nit-picking Pharisees even today.) Note carefully that ask Jesus a trick question, “is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Instead of walking into their trap with a direct answer, and in true rabbinic form, Jesus answers their question with a trick question of his own, “What did Moses command you?” Now I don't know whether the Pharisees failed to see this trick question coming, or whether they chose to ignore the ramifications of it, but they walked right into the trap.

“Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” the Pharisees replied immediately with the correct legal answer. Jesus then proceeds to snap the trap the Pharisees had set, but on them. His answer rings with an echo from Genesis, challenging not only the scripture in Deuteronomy quoted by the Pharisees but putting forth the goodness inherent in God's creative act as a trump over the law written by Moses. In short, Jesus told the Pharisees that their law in scripture was a concession to reality, a deviation from what God had originally intended.

Not that this is the only time Jesus challenged the scriptures, for he already had criticized the laws of food regulations and of the Sabbath. It will horrify some to recognize that Jesus uses the same principle here as there, namely that human context and spiritual values are to be set above specific laws and regulations. Jesus saw the cruelty and injustices of the law of divorce in the regulation which the Pharisees quoted from Deuteronomy 24:1-4. He saw how that regulation countered God's purpose in a marriage relationship, namely the total one-ness that results from a total commitment in that relationship. To Jesus, this permission of Moses, making divorce easy, and resulting in cruel injustice, was a case of man-made tradition contradicting a commandment of God. "What (not whom) God has joined, let no one separate", Jesus concludes his answer to them.

Of course, if one takes Jesus' declaration of God's intent vis-à-vis marriage as an absolute injunction, then the real-life question of what is the status of those who are being / who have been divorced rears its ugly head. The disciples, ever unclear about the meaning of things at least in Mark's gospel, once again search for understanding later in the privacy of the house. They at least have the good sense to wait until they're away from the crowds and in private with Jesus to ask their questions that reveal their lack of understanding. Because their questions are not unlike those asked by people in the church in Mark's day and indeed in the church today, Jesus' further explanations are highly useful for them, and for us. The disciples probe the issue of the status of divorcees, and Jesus' answer on divorce reveals a seriousness about the depth of the marriage relationship that appears absolute.

The absoluteness of this answer has provided no end of grief and hurt for people over the centuries, ranging from those who were never able to rid themselves of a sense of guilt in a second marriage, even when that second marriage was truly blessed with love, and harmony, and ending only with the death of one of the marriage partners, to those who would repeatedly self-destruct any subsequent relationship for fear that it would lead them into sinning. The disastrous effect of his private answer to the disciples is so opposite to how Jesus felt about and towards people that it is difficult to reconcile with how he is in so many other instances filled with compassion and empathy. I wouldn't go quite so far as to say that someone was putting words in Jesus' mouth with this answer, but the answer really is curious. Moreover, that the answer contains gender balance is both appealing and highly curious. Appealing in the sense that like other incidents where Jesus shows unusual-for-his time kindness towards women, this answer is gender neutral. The answer is also highly curious because in Judaism the concept of a woman divorcing her husband was virtually unthinkable. His Jewish listeners, his disciples, could hardly imagine a woman instigating divorce. Or could they?

Of course they could, because they lived in a society that permitted divorce action to be instigated by either party. That Roman law permitted divorce to be started by either party is a matter of historical fact; that the subject of divorce is treated in this way in Mark's gospel suggests that such divorce was not only legal but was relatively common practice, so much so that it was a concern if not to Jesus himself then at least to the early church. That the text is so explicit about the definition of marriage suggests also that the subject of same-sex marriage is not nearly so new a topic as many would like to propose, that indeed it was a hot topic also in the early church.

So, are those who are unfortunate enough to have suffered the trauma of divorce, whether their fault or not, whether the divorce was 'justifiable' or not, are those people to suffer forever, banned to sit in the "rejects" area of the sanctuary? Do we return to those dreadful days when the church ran the state as well, and we could take hot branding irons to permanently sear a capital letter 'A' on their foreheads so that all could avoid these poor unfortunates, in case divorce was contagious? (Funny how it never seemed to infect those men in power who were able to avoid such public pain and disgrace for their private actions!)

I think the text answers that question as well, and the answer is definitely not what the blood-thirsty "damn them all to hell" crowd of today's puritans would want to hear. Recall that just before

this incident Jesus had taken a child into his arms and proclaimed that “any one who would place a stumbling block in front of one of these little ones who believe in me” would face a torturous and painful eternity, “better ... to have a stone tied around their neck and to be thrown into the sea.” The implications had to be clear even to the disciples, that Jesus considered the children to be most precious, and that anyone who prevented children from exercising their faith would be in eternal trouble, in way more trouble than simple adultery.

So what’s the very next thing the disciples do, even with this warning of eternal damnation still fresh in their ears? They prevent children from coming to Jesus! Can you believe how human the disciples were? Can you believe that these people, who had the privilege of walking and talking and eating and drinking with Jesus, had such a lack of clarity about his intentions and meanings? There are many today who bold as brass claim to know Jesus and his intentions with impeccable clarity, and yet who still place themselves and their very souls in peril of the “unquenchable fire” by banning people of simple but pure faith from approaching their saviour.

Were the disciples so banished to eternal fire? Of course not! Thanks to the mercy and grace of God in Christ not even those who today would ban people of simple and pure faith from approaching Christ are banished from the kingdom. Even those, who with full Pharisaic self-imposed righteousness, who would take upon themselves the role of deciding who may and who may not approach and touch Christ, are not banished in the way that was earlier described. All who would accept the kingdom with a faith uncorrupted by the sophistry, the duplicity, the deviousness introduced by adulthood will find, and gain entry into the kingdom of God.

With this complex set of answers and yet simple actions, Jesus both demonstrated the limitless grace of God and the need for the church’s doctrine to be dynamic, changing and even dropping those parts that do not implement the grace of God. This is not a new perspective on scripture, as even one of our subsidiary standards puts it, “we are a church that is Reformed, and Reforming.” Against the Pharisaic tendency of legalism Jesus portrays the importance of acknowledging that those with faith, and especially those with a child-like complete faith, will be those who enter the kingdom.

Note that this refers to a simple faith, not a simplistic faith. Jesus is not calling for a blind faith susceptible to corruption and abuse within and without the church, but for a faith that is uncorrupted by the ways of the world, a faith that rediscovers the basic essence of uncomplicated love exemplified by Jesus in his sacrifice that removes all sin from us. As the bottom line in this whole story, Jesus displayed the love he had for them and for us, as he scooped the children in his arms, and he blessed them.

That is the bottom line in this whole story. Not a bottom line of ‘net worth’, of whether we can live well enough, or purely enough to enter the kingdom of God, but a bottom line of being swept up in the loving arms of Jesus, safe and secure as a child in the loving arms of a parent. Thank God that doctrine is dynamic, that the church can, from time to time, hear and respond to the grace of God in Christ.

Today is World Communion Sunday, when the whole church gathers around Christ’s table. Warmed by images of Jesus holding children in his arms and blessing them, notice that the table has been set and supper is ready. In a few minutes we will call the children, including all of you, to come to the table, and when we have eaten perhaps we can recognize that we – young and old, male and female, Jew and Gentile, straight and gay, married, single, and divorced – are indeed also among the ‘them’ he has blessed.