

I do not remember her name, but I cannot forget her story.

She was a waitress in California.

She found out that I was a pastor and told me about the last time she had been in church.

It was a large Catholic church on Christmas Eve.

She went to mass, out of a typical mixture of desire and duty, taking her small child with her.

No one said anything, but everyone looked.

There was a child in her arms but no ring on her finger and no man on her arm.

She was never greeted--she was avoided like a leper--and she was refused Communion; she had not been back.

And as she told me this, with her soul almost bleeding in her full eyes, I pictured it all too vividly, and was struck by how ironic it was that there were probably so many prayers and candles and canticles to Mary.

She was welcome as a virgin, and as an ideal, and as a statue, but when she walked in as a real person on Christmas Eve, there was no room for her in the inn.

Hers is one of countless heartbreaking stories about people coming to Jesus only to be discouraged and turned away by the disciples.

What God works to bring together, the Church is careful to separate, often by citing precisely today's gospel reading from Mark.

It has become a proof text that Jesus is against divorce, and whether overtly or subtly, whether directly in speech or indirectly in awkward and suffocating silence, the church has many times over the years turned away those who have suffered divorce as if Jesus now wants nothing to do with them.

He touches sickly children and lepers; he sticks his fingers in a man's ears and spits in a man's eyes; he casts out demons and endures the constant bumbling and misunderstanding and finally betrayal and abandonment of his disciples...but somehow Jesus has no place in his community for the divorced?

He is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; surely the sin in and around divorce, however it may be untangled and judged, is part of that.

He is the Christ on the cross; surely he more than anyone is capable of knowing and holding and overcoming the unspeakable pain divorce brings.

This gospel we name good news is not about Jesus trying to shackle people with guilt and shame and judgment; if anything, it is about welcome and liberation.

Yet the church has often abused it as a gavel for abusing people, even worse a cover to promote and protect abusive relationships in the name of marital fidelity where divorce is a regrettably superior option.

We must be careful with these biblical texts, and with the people who gather to hear them.

This is why a Bible professor long ago drilled it into my head that, in his clever turn of phrase, *a text without a context is just a pretext.*

To hear this gospel correctly, we need to hear it in its context, which has just as many unspoken assumptions as we do.

The Pharisees and crowds listening to Jesus share some first century Jewish assumptions about marriage and divorce, for example:

+ Legally, men are people, and women are property.

Only men can make certain legal transactions, among them filing for divorce.

+ A man can divorce his wife, in the words of Deuteronomy, *because he finds something objectionable about her*, and debate was plentiful about how to interpret that phrase.

+ Husbands and wives do not choose one another, or whether or when to get married.

Marriages are arranged by the parents.

+ If a man divorces his wife, therefore, his real issue is not with her, it's with his father, who arranged the marriage and entered into an agreement with her family.

A divorcing husband is worried about honoring his father, not doing right by his ex-wife.

+ Adultery meant, very literally, to dishonor a man by having sex with his wife.

Sex outside of marriage was not considered adultery, unless it involved a man's wife.

+ A divorced woman was damaged goods, an economic liability to be avoided like a single mother at mass on Christmas Eve.

I think it is safe for us to conclude that Jesus is speaking to a totally different reality than what our society and church assume.

And what does Jesus speak into this entrenched, patriarchal reality?

He tells the Pharisees, who are all men, that divorce was a capitulation to hardness of heart and points them to God's intention for lasting marriage instead.

He tells the disciples, who are all men, that if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery, which gives her a lot more power and personhood than they would ever imagine a woman would have.

He tells them also that a man's adultery is committed against her--not against daddy or against another man, but against *her*.

The woman, you see, is of equal importance and stature in Jesus' unusual eyes.

The same is true of children, who in the same context were nothing more than expensive liabilities, property rather than people, a nuisance to be endured until adulthood.

When Jesus insists on blessing them, and naming them as rabbis for the kingdom, he is lifting and empowering and celebrating them in much the same way he honors women in his discussion of marriage and its unfortunate undoings.

In each case, what Jesus is doing is moving the conversation to new and life-giving ground.

He moves the conversation with the Pharisees from divorce to marriage, from loopholes to covenant, and from human provisions to God's intentions.

He moves the conversation with the disciples from patriarchy to equality, from judicial speculations to justice.

He moves the conversation about children from excluding to embracing, from whether or not to tolerate them to what can be learned from their wisdom.

And all of this points to what is really going on in and around this text as Mark uncoils his story; all of this points us back to context.

You see, it is not just history's context but Mark's literary context that we need to keep an eye on.

The Pharisees are not looking to learn from Jesus, but to hang him.

They are testing him, trying to trap him.

It was Herod's divorce that prompted John the Baptist to say the wrong thing and get himself beheaded, after all; maybe Jesus can be baited into a similar mistake.  
The Pharisees are having conversations about his death, about how to write his certificate of dismissal.  
And so Jesus is on his way to the cross, where he will move the great conversation of God and humanity from death to life.

It is in the midst of that struggle, the ancient and cosmic clash of agendas between God and humanity, between our fickle, wander-lusting, power-clutching, hard-hearted, self-centered machinations and God's intentions for generous and mutual community marked by steadfast love and life-giving blessing, that this text begins to shine like good news.

Women and children are beloved and important in the eyes of God.

The most vulnerable are the most valuable.

God works to join together, not to separate; thus marriage is a calling and divorce is a capitulation.

And if anyone wants to bring a child to Jesus, even if he is divorced or if she is a single mother, do not stop them.

It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

Indeed, it is in the small child of an unwed mother that it comes.

It is in the broken flesh of the crucified Christ, and in bread broken like hearts and promises, that the kingdom comes.

In Jesus God has joined together heaven's dreams and human skin, our brokenness and God's blessing.

In Jesus God has also joined together a community of sinners, an assortment of Pharisees and adulterers and disciples and disasters named church, as broken and blessed as the bread on the table so that there can be a welcome for the waitress and someone ready to serve the server.

In Jesus God has joined together all the horrors in human life and all the hope of creation, all our pain and all the power to move it into Easter joy.

In Jesus, God has joined us to one another, and joined us forever to God.

Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.