

My theology has changed pretty dramatically over the years, and I suspect it will continue to as long as I keep living and learning. And as a Presbyterian, that's perfectly appropriate. In fact, it's what we should expect. We have a motto coming out the Reformation that is uniquely our own, and the motto is this: *semper reformanda*, which means "always reforming." In other words, the work of Reformation is never completed. In every generation, we are called to listen again to the voice of the Spirit, asking ourselves, what is God calling us to in our time? What is the good news for us today? Christianity is always about good news for the world, which means the gospel is either good news for everyone, or it is good news for no one. The message and ministry of Christ doesn't divide the world into insiders and outsiders, worthy and unworthy. No, Jesus' message of the kingdom of God is good news for everyone. It's good news for those who are single and for those who are married. It's good news for those who are divorced and for those who've remarried. It's good news for those who are straight and those who are queer. It's good news for everyone. I need to state that up front today, as clearly as possible, because these words of Jesus and the story of Genesis 2 have been weaponized to both shame and exclude. They've been used to put a scarlet letter of shame on anyone who would dare to leave a broken marriage, and they've been used to cudgel those who dare to find companionship and intimacy outside the confines of hetero normativity. We will do neither of those today. This pulpit is a shame and cudgel free zone, this week and every week. That's the first thing I need to say.

Secondly, before we get into the weeds of Mark 10, let's take a step back. We have been in a sermon series entitled, "The Upside-down Kingdom." Week by week, we've witnessed Jesus overturn our expectations of who belongs at God's table. A few weeks ago, we saw how a marginalized Syrophenician woman teaches Jesus and helps open him to his own ideals. After that, we saw Jesus redefine winning by embracing loss. Two weeks ago, we saw Jesus redefine greatness by embracing what is lowest and least. Week after week, we see that Jesus turns our ideas of who is worthy on their head and in the process uplift those who have been overlooked. Knowing this about Jesus, what chance is there that when it comes to the issue of marriage and divorce that suddenly Jesus becomes exclusionary and reinforces our already existing notions of worthiness? What chance is there of that? Zero. There's zero chance that Jesus would do that.

For all of you who heard these words and felt a wave of shame come over you, let me remind you that Jesus never deals in shame. Ever. For those of you who heard his words about divorce and felt relieved because that hasn't been your story, let me remind you that Jesus never hands out merit badges of righteousness for meeting some moral standard. Ever. If we know this about Jesus, then we can come to this difficult text and be sure that some of our assumptions must be wrong. And in doing this, we are being faithful to scripture, not revisionist. If we know the character of Christ and then hear him say something completely out of character, instead of revising Christ's character to now include shame and self-righteousness, we instead assume we must be misunderstanding him. That's being faithful to Christ as we seek to understand the scriptures.

With all that said, the Pharisees come to Jesus and ask, "Does the law allow a man to divorce his wife?" This may seem like an innocent question, but it isn't. Jesus has been traveling throughout northern Israel, and now he's approaching Judea for the first time, which is Herod's country. Herod had John the Baptist killed for pointing out that Herod had married

his brother's wife unlawfully. Why do you think the Pharisees are asking Jesus' position on marriage and divorce? Clearly, they are trying to trap him. But Jesus will have none of it. As he often does, he answers a question with a question, asking them what Moses' said. They respond that Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce. That's Deuteronomy 24 for those of you who want to look it up, and if you do, you'll notice the passage doesn't paint a picture of equality in marriage. It's only the man who had the power to divorce his wife, not the other way around. The Bible emerges from a patriarchal culture, where men had more power and value than women. That's just true. We don't have to like that, but we should recognize it. The certificate of divorce that Moses talked about is in its own way a gift to the divorced woman. It allowed her to remarry, and in the absence of the certificate, presumably the woman would be destitute. Even in patriarchal culture from which Deuteronomy emerges, the law of Moses still shows concern for the wellbeing of a divorced woman, but that should not be confused with gender equality either.

Jesus says that Moses gave this command because of your unyielding hearts, but that's not the way it's supposed to be. In referring to, "your unyielding hearts," Jesus isn't speaking just to the Pharisees but to everyone, to you and to me. The unyielding heart is part of our human condition. At our best, we strive to be loving and just, but sin has touched all of our hearts, which means that despite our best intentions, we don't always live the way God intends. Do we? I sure don't. You see, there's a gap between what God intends for us, and the reality of our lives. God intends for us to live in love, to treat each other with respect and dignity, and to recognize and honor the divine image that each one of us bears. That's the way it's supposed to be, and that's why Jesus refers to Genesis 2. God created humanity and gave the gift of marriage so that spouses can imperfectly reflect to each other the love and commitment that God has for us. Jesus is saying that the bond that marriage creates can't be easily discarded with a certificate. Any of you who have been divorced know that. That's just true.

Now, Jesus' approval of heterosexual marriage in this passage does not mean he would disapprove of same-gendered marriages. It just doesn't. Jesus never speaks a word about queer love, which means he left it up to us to determine if the love between people of the same gender can also imperfectly reflect the love and commitment that God has for us. To me, the answer is clearly yes. Now, I didn't always think this way, but *semper reformanda*. We are always reforming, always listening to God's word in our generation.

While Jesus' words about remarriage and adultery are difficult to hear, much less understand, I think we can all agree that in both the ancient world and in our world today, we too easily discard people. Sometimes, in our hurt or even in our selfishness, we may try to discard a spouse, and that's not the way it's supposed to be. And while Jesus in this passage makes no provision for divorce, he does in Matthew. More than that, we know that divorce is part of living in the gap between how God intends us to live and the reality of our lives. No one comes to their wedding day intending for it to end in divorce, but guess what, it happens. So, what do we do with the gap between God's intention for us and the reality of our lives? I have good news for you—you don't need to do anything. In fact, there's nothing you can do, because God has already done it. The grace of God fills the gap between what God intends for us and our lived reality. Though we make promises we do not keep, God always keeps God's promises, and God promises to be faithful to us, even when we are unfaithful.

You see, long before you are ever a husband or a wife, long before your marriage begins and long after it ends, you are and will always remain a child of God. That's your first and final identity. Jesus says, "Allow the children to come to me. Don't forbid them, because God's kingdom belongs to people like these children. I assure you that whoever doesn't welcome God's kingdom like a child will never enter it." Then he hugged the children and blessed them." We don't enter God's kingdom as husbands or wives, as mothers or fathers. We enter as children, and God always loves, blesses, hugs, and welcomes her children. You God's child, whether you're single or marriage, divorced or remarried, straight or queer. And there is nothing that can keep Jesus from blessing you and embracing you. You will always belong to God, and you are always welcome at God's table.