Sunday, October 8, 2000
JESUS: MARRIAGE, DIVORCE AND CHILDREN
Mark 10:2-16

In the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Jesus has very little to say about marriage, divorce, adultery, and children. The passage read earlier from Mark's gospel is one example. The same story is included in Matthew's gospel. In this incident, he is asked a question about divorce, and that's what prompts his brief statement about marriage and divorce. He did not initiate the discussion. This is followed by a story where he welcomes the little children that his disciples were trying to keep away from him. The only other place in the gospels where he comments on marriage, divorce, and adultery is in the Sermon on the Mount.

There's one other story in the New Testament that connects Jesus with marriage. In the Gospel of John, he attended a wedding reception, and when the wine ran out, at his mother's request, he provided the additional wine.

Before we examine this passage from Mark's gospel to determine what it has to say to us today as we struggle with divorce, adultery, marriage, and children, some background is necessary.

Jesus grew up in the Jewish tradition. Therefore, everything he had to say about divorce, adultery, marriage, and children needs to be understood in that context. He accepted some of the traditions he inherited and challenged others, as we shall see.

What were some of these traditions or cultural practices, especially in connection with marriage and divorce? In the Old Testament tradition, polygamy (having several wives) and also one or several concubines (a woman or several women living with a man to whom they are not married) were widely practiced. Neither is ever condemned by Jesus, as far as we know from the New Testament records. We do know from other Jewish sources that polygamy continued to be practiced within Judaism for centuries following the New Testament period.

In the Old Testament tradition, social regulations regarding adultery, incest, rape, and prostitution were determined largely by considerations of the males' property rights over women. Prostitution was considered quite natural and necessary as a safeguard of the virginity of brides and the property rights of husbands (Genesis 38:12-19; Joshua 2:1-7).

In later Jewish texts, a man was not guilty of sin for visiting a prostitute, though the prostitute (or maidservant) herself was regarded as a sinner. Today we are moving, with some social turbulence, toward a more equitable, non-patriarchal set of social arrangements in which women are no longer regarded as the chattel of men. We are trying to move beyond the double standard. Love, fidelity, and mutual respect are replacing property rights, although in many cultures there is still a long way to go. Regretfully, we have as yet made very little progress in changing the double standard in regard to prostitution.

It was also the tradition in the Old Testament that the people of Israel were not to marry those who were not Israelites. There were some exceptions, however. Joseph married the Egyptian Aseneth, Moses married Zipporah and the Cushite woman, and Esther married Ahasuerus. It wasn't too many years ago that many states in the United States had laws against interracial marriage. We have witnessed, within the lifetime of many of us, the non-violent struggle to

nullify state laws against interracial marriage. Traditions can change quite radically, even in a single lifetime.

The law of Moses in the Old Testament allowed for divorce. In fact, divorce was very easy, easier than it is now, especially for husbands. Jesus, however, said it was too easy. He strongly disagreed with the tradition. He said that people, especially men, were not taking the marriage commitment seriously enough. That's the issue in the story read earlier from Mark's gospel. "Some Pharisees came and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.'" What they didn't say was that, according to the law of Moses, a wife did not have the same privilege. She could not divorce her husband because she was considered his property.

Later, the disciples asked him for more information on the subject, and he said, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." In other words, if you are married and then see someone that looks better to you, and so you get a divorce in order to marry that other person, you are committing adultery.

With the religious authorities, Jesus had been discussing the religious rules of his tradition, where only a husband could dissolve a marriage. Now, the Greco-Roman practice, in which either husband or wife could begin proceedings, is brought into the discussion. In that tradition, either the wife or the husband could say, "I don't want to be married anymore," and the civil contract — which already had in place property conditions in case of divorce, what we today call a prenuptial agreement — was carried out. Jesus, however, had a higher view of the marriage commitment than either the Hebrews or the Greeks and Romans.

He said that if either wife or husband were to marry again following a divorce, he or she would be committing adultery. To commit adultery was to break one of the Ten Commandments. At the same time, according to Jesus, it is one commandment, along with the other nine, that all of us break regularly.

Remember what he said in the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:27) And then a little later, he said the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount as he did in this passage from Mark's gospel: "Whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." (Matthew 5:32)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also gave new meaning and a broader interpretation to a number of the other commandments included in what we call the Ten Commandments. It is obvious that most of us break most of these regularly as well. For example, the tenth commandment is: "Do not covet." Can any one of us say we have not broken that commandment and that we continue to break it? Or how about the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods." That, of course, includes the god of money, the god of success, the god of fame, the god of work, or whatever in your life you make your ultimate concern — that is your god. Or how about the commandment to keep one day holy? Or the commandment to honor your father and your mother? Isn't it amazing how we single out one or another of the commandments and then harshly judge other people but forget about many of the other commandments and how we continually break them?

Or how about the commandment against bearing false witness? Last August, there was a paid ad in the Minneapolis daily paper. It had the headline, “Lessons in Morality from Minnesota Atheists; Lesson No. 1: Bearing False Witness.” Here’s part of what the ad said: “Telling lies about one’s neighbors is wrong. But we atheists are maligned frequently as a matter of course. Too many pandering politicians and non-thinking religionists persist in labeling us as ‘immoral’ and ‘wicked.’ This mean-spirited charge is totally devoid of evidence... Despite this, religious bullies continue to rant that we are the source of all manner of evil. They violate their own commandment, ‘You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.'” It’s a valid point.

The good news is that the God revealed in Jesus, the “Word made flesh,” is a loving and forgiving God. That’s what many of the stories in the gospel tell us over and over again. For example, there’s that beautiful story in the Gospel of John (chapter 8) where the religious authorities bring a woman to Jesus who had been caught in the act of adultery, and they are about to stone her to death as the religious law provides. They ask Jesus if he agrees with that rule. His answer is, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” When they heard it, they went away, one by one. Then Jesus asked her, “Where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

What Jesus taught is that rules, such as the Ten Commandments, are ideals or goals that we are to do our best to follow, knowing at the same time that we will never live up to them perfectly. But that doesn’t mean we should throw them out or not make any effort to live accordingly. They are the way God intends us to live, and when we strive toward these ideals, all of life is better.

In addition, Jesus taught and practiced in his daily life and in his relationships with others, the “love ethic,” and he taught that we are always to examine traditions and rules with that love ethic in mind. It is the most important principle of all. Traditions are important, as he knew from his own Hebrew tradition. However, he also knew that some traditions, like that of patriarchy, can be used for domination and exploitation of others rather than to enhance the fullness of human potential.

So he did not hesitate to criticize and call into question some of the religious traditions and to give them a new meaning. The love ethic, which he taught and lived, is non-exploitative — hence no sexual exploitation of children, no using of another person; it does not dominate — so no patriarchal treatment of women as property; it is responsible, mutual, caring, and loving.

Our moral and ethical task then is to apply Jesus’ love ethic to whatever traditions are present in our culture. This doesn’t mean everything is allowed. It means that everything is to be critiqued by Jesus’ love commandment. This means, for example, that we teach and counsel young people not only with ethical and moral rules or standards but also with illustrations of how certain behaviors damage ourselves and others. Rules and standards are important, but the love ethic of Jesus goes even further.

Most important of all, as followers of Jesus, we are not to use the fact that rules are broken or that someone’s marriage has failed or some other commandment has not been kept to exclude others or even to give a hint that someone might not be welcome or that we are better than they are.

A ministerial colleague of mine in another city told me this story. A young man, who is a single parent of one child, attended church sporadically as he was growing up. The church where my friend is the minister was the first one this man had joined.

One Sunday morning, he walked out of church after the scripture reading, the same one that was read today from Mark's gospel. He didn't leave the building, and after the church service, he came to see my friend. He asked for help in interpreting the Bible. He opened his Bible to Mark 10:11, where Jesus says, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery." And then he said, "Does this mean that I can never marry again? Because my first marriage failed, does that mean God will never forgive me, and others will continue to judge me? Am I supposed to stay away from church? Am I welcome or am I not?"

He'd been close enough to the fires of judgment from another church and from peers to have been burned severely.

My ministerial friend assured the young man that God is a loving and forgiving God, that God's grace is for all people, and that we all fall short — that no one lives up to God's ideals perfectly. My friend also assured this young man that he was most welcome in that church, and if he decided to marry again, he would officiate at the ceremony.

That young man would also be welcome in this church, as are all of you who are here, no matter what burden or guilt you might be carrying. We welcome the divorced, the re-married, those who have borne false witness, those who have been angry with another person, those who have had lustful thoughts about another person, those who have coveted and who have gone after false gods, and whatever other commandment you have broken.

That's why the second part of this story from Mark's gospel is so important. It is a reaffirmation that God welcomes all people. In the same way that Jesus used the example of a little child to answer the disciples' argument about who was the greatest, he squelches this legalistic argument and instead invites children to him, takes them in his arms, and blesses them. The disciples once again had been trying to keep children away from Jesus. They considered their agenda more important than anything the children might offer or need. He rebuked the disciples and said, "Let the children come to me. Do not stop them."

These words are a warning to all of us—"Do not stop them!" Do not try to stop anyone from experiencing the grace and love of God, and do not stop yourself.

This invitation to come to God and experience God's love is for all of us, not only children. The words over the main front door of this church say it plainly: "Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Amen.