

October 8, 2006  
Mark 10:2-16  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick  
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## *Creative Compassion*

When my friend and her husband were celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I heard someone say to her, “Fifty wonderful years together!” To which she replied with a wry smile, “Well, no. But forty of them were pretty good.” In that brief quip she expressed both the blessings and the challenges of married life.

Living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Western culture, we find ourselves in a time when the institution of marriage is in considerable flux. This past week I heard Garrison Keillor quote Groucho Marx commenting on the institution of marriage. Marx said, “Marriage is a wonderful institution ... if you like living in an institution.”

This institution has been undergoing considerable shifts. For every two marriages, there is one divorce. More young people are choosing to live together, marrying only when they decide to have children. And some decide not to marry even then. Women are no longer as dependent on men economically for survival and therefore some women, and some men, choose to live alone throughout their adult lives. And some same-gender couples are asking for the same civil rights and theological blessings that come with the rite of marriage.

In the face of the shifting landscape of marriage, we hear dire predictions all the time. Quotes such as these:

- *Marriage has universally fallen into awful disrepute.*
- *The family, in its old sense, is disappearing from our land...the very existence of our society is endangered.*

Would it surprise you to know that the first quote was written by Martin Luther in 1522? And the second is from the Boston quarterly Review in 1859. (What is Marriage For?, pg. 88)

In some respects the more things change, the more they stay the same. Every generation tends to think that the younger generation is falling apart because they do not follow the old ways. Remember Tevya from ‘Fiddler on the Roof’ who was so upset when one of his daughters comes to him and doesn’t want a ‘traditional’ marriage, in other words, one arranged by a matchmaker. Instead she has picked out a young man whom she loves. Tevya’s response is one of total astonishment. “What does love have to do with it?” Yet in a very tender scene he goes home and, apparently for the first time, asks his wife of 25 years if she loves him.

For most of human history, marriage has been primarily an economic arrangement between two families, seeking to provide for the care of the next generation. In a

‘traditional’ marriage, people talked first about money and the couple was left to work out the details of affection later. Ironically, now that people (at least in our culture) pick their own partners based on affection, studies show that money management is the #1 source of tension between spouses.

Marriage is an interesting intertwining of public and private sentiments and commitments. They are the twin sides of a single Moebius strip. We think we are talking about private matters and then find we are involved in the public implications and vice versa.

We encounter this mixing of public and private concerns in today’s gospel reading concerning marriage and divorce. This is an emotionally charged passage not only in its original context, but also in the ways it has been used by the church over the years.

Notice the context. Context matters. If you are talking about a particular topic, it matters whether you are talking with co-workers, your parents, a partner, children, therapist, lawyer... What you say and how you say it varies.

In the gospel context, it doesn’t say Jesus is giving a teaching to the people in general. He is responding to the Pharisees, who have posed the question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” It says that the Pharisees asked this question to *test* him. What was the test about? Why were they testing him?

Some scholars suggest that this interchange was not really about the general question of marriage, at all. It may have been more of a politically loaded question - an attempt to get Jesus in trouble with King Herod. In the

background is the fate of John the Baptist. In an earlier chapter (6), we have learned that John the Baptist was beheaded because he spoke out against Herod’s playing fast and loose with marriage vows in order to have a liaison with his brother’s wife.

In responding to the Pharisees, Jesus himself may have been a bit tongue in cheek. First he calls their attention to the Mosaic Law. The Pharisees were experts in the law. Then he calls their attention to the Hebrew Scriptures themselves. The Pharisees were rigorous and faithful students of the scriptures. Jesus effectively says in response to their “test,” “You already know where to look for your answer.” He does not back down to the Pharisees or to Herod for that matter.

So, let’s look at the scripture to which Jesus refers. This is also a charged passage that has been used by the church in unhealthy ways. But that’s another sermon. Suffice it to say for today that in this creation story in Genesis 2, we see an image of God as having creative compassion. God saw that it was not good for the human creature to be alone. So with compassion, God gets creative, making another human so they can be companions for one another. In this brief passage the primary impulse for marriage is companionship.

Marriage is a covenant, a committed relationship, a bonding of two people. Marriage partners are called to embody the love of God for one another. It calls for creative compassion. It’s that simple and that challenging.

One possibility in today’s gospel text is that Jesus is offering a challenge back to

King Herod. However, if we consider just the content of what he had to say, we also see that, in his cultural context, maybe he was being creatively compassionate when he said, “what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

In Jesus’ day, for a man to divorce his wife, the man simply had to say, “I divorce you,” three times and that was it. In the Hebrew community, a woman didn’t have that same right to divorce her husband. Also, in those times, women were financially dependent first on their fathers and then on their husbands. So, imagine what happened to women whose husbands divorced them. They had no place to go but the streets – to beg or to prostitution. One way to look at Jesus’ words against divorce is as a cry for justice for those women who could not defend themselves.

But we live in different times. Women are more independent economically although studies show that after a divorce they are more economically vulnerable than men.

I never met an engaged couple who didn’t think it would last forever. Yet, I have met many people who found it didn’t. I think, today, Jesus would still encourage us to avoid divorce where at all possible. Yet at the heart of Jesus’ life and ministry was creative compassion. There are times when the only faithful and compassionate response to a deeply broken relationship is a divorce.

When such a painful experience happens it calls for creative compassion from those around the couple, including those of us in the faith community.

I knew a couple who were members of a parenting group in another church. After counseling, prayers, and tears they decided they needed to divorce. Yet, they were committed to continue working together to be good parents. I knew from previous experience that usually when there is a divorce, just as the couple divides up their possessions and make custody arrangements, usually only one of them gets the church. Often in the process of the divorce itself they both avoid the church. So, I spoke with each of them individually about this and encouraged them not to let this happen. I told them they were still very welcome in the congregation, and that we wanted to be a resource to them individually and as a family. I thought maybe they would already know this, but I discovered how important it was to say it directly. They both thanked me and indeed continued to come to the congregation with their children. As our closing verses in today’s gospel reading say, “Let the little children (and the big children) come to me.”

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When I saw the topic of today’s gospel text, I was struck again by how often the lectionary text touches on something that is happening in the church and world today.

Two weeks ago, Larry and I, and other delegates from our church attended the Annual Meeting of the Maine Conference of the United Church of Christ. One of the resolutions we passed at the meeting is called, “The Quality and Equality of Marriage.” Remember, in our denomination’s polity (governance), a decision made by a gathering of the Cumberland Association, or the Maine Conference,

or the General Synod (national UCC) does not speak **for** us. Rather, it speaks **to** us. Yet, in our covenant with one another as members of the United Church of Christ, we promise to give such resolutions prayerful consideration.

This resolution encourages all local churches to reflect on our individual and societal experiences of marriage, and thus, also, divorce. We are asked to consider ways we can be supportive of one another in our spiritual journeys as partners and as parents, and also as ones who know the experience of divorce.

The resolution also asks us to consider the experience of same gender couples who are asking for civil rights and religious blessings for their unions. These are couples who are sitting in our pews in churches around Maine, and around the country.

Preceding the Maine conference meeting, knowing that this resolution was coming, we at First Parish Church began having these conversations at Church Council meetings and intend to continue in these discussions. We also plan to provide opportunities for others in the congregation to reflect on these matters. We believe it is part of our commitment that is expressed in our welcoming statement on the front of the bulletin where we say that *we are diverse in many ways... including... sexual orientation.* (and) *We affirm that the love of Christ for each person knows no bounds.*

It's my observation that one of the tension points in these conversations is the word marriage itself. Some people are supportive of civil unions and

blessings, but have difficulty with the word marriage. Let us talk about it.

I hope in our conversations together we will be guided by the kind of spirit that is central to the biblical witness about both God and Jesus – a spirit of creative compassion. May it be so with us.