

Mark 10:2-16^{vii viii}

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." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

^{vii} **About Mark 10:2-16**

Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce is given in the context of controversy. The Mosaic regulation (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) assumes the practice of divorce (by the husband); the "certificate of dismissal" was intended to protect the wife by freeing her to remarry.

Jesus' answer transforms the question from what is legal to what is right. He quotes from both creation stories (Gen. 1:27; 2:24) to reestablish God's original intention for marriage. The words "Let no one separate" refer to the husband, who was the agent of divorce in Jewish law, and not to a judicial authority. The kingdom calls for a return to the kind of relationships created before the fall, for obedience to the Creator's will rather than the use

of a law necessitated by sin.

The adult parties involved in divorce are not the only victims of such a system. In verses 13-16, Jesus embraces the most vulnerable members of a society in which children always suffered most from famine, war or social disintegration. Jesus' teaching about the relationship of the kingdom of God to the child focuses the disciples' attention on those qualities—humility, submission, honesty and openness—that are necessary in a healthy relation to God.

^{viii} **Reflection and Response**

Today's gospel is guaranteed to raise some hackles. The dramatic contrast between the teaching of Jesus and modern tolerance of divorce should prompt us to look more closely at the social context affecting Jesus' message.

In Jewish family law of his day, women had no reciprocal rights. Therefore, the debate between rabbis was limited to the reasons allowing men to dump their wives. One school permitted divorce only in the case of her adultery. Another allowed men the flimsiest excuse to divorce. ("Stale matzos? You're history!") Of the "career tracks" open to women, the most common options after they'd been evicted were prostitution or starvation.

Jesus calls for a whole new way of looking at the issue, beyond patriarchal structures. He undermines male dominance by holding up an ideal in which women and men enjoy equal status, recognizing both their choice to divorce and the tragedy that ensues when either partner exercises that right. As in the Sermon on the Mount, he calls people to the ideal of absolute fidelity.

One of Jesus' primary concerns is the effect on children, who were at the bottom of the socio-economic scale. At the most basic level of social organization, the household, Jesus reverses the normal assumptions. In his eyes, those who are least powerful are most important.

Quietly consider:

Not independence, not codependence, but interdependence is God's hope for creation. How can I acknowledge and welcome my interdependence with God? Jesus? my family? my friends? all people? creation?