

Karen Hollis  
Sermon – Mark 10:2-16  
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Thanksgiving is my favourite holiday because it is about food and being grateful. In my country, Thanksgiving is a big deal, not bigger than Christmas, but equally as important. Even if it isn't a major holiday, it is a good practice to gather together and intentionally give thanks for the harvest, for our loved ones and our many blessings. When you think about Thanksgiving, what memories come to mind? Any you want to share aloud? Any unique traditions? What do you look forward to?

Nothing brings out family dynamics like a holiday gathering. Think about who over the years has been around your Thanksgiving table . . . who would people talk about and remember around the table? Who did no one talk about? Who was simply absent? Who do you miss? My Thanksgiving celebrations looked basically the same every year for the first 20 years of my life. Thursday with grandma and grandpa (I certainly miss them); then usually on Saturday my mom or one of her siblings would host her entire family, all 15-20 of us. Then, as we grew into adulthood there were more schedules to consider, new branches of the family, and people had to make choices. One year I hosted a small Thanksgiving gathering for my immediate family, my aunt, maybe a roommate or two, and a dear friend of mine from seminary. My friend had nowhere else to go for Thanksgiving that year because he was in the middle of a divorce from his spouse of 35 years and his son wasn't speaking to him; the rest of his family had passed away or lived across the country, so we welcomed him in to our gathering and we gave thanks together for our many blessings even in the midst of lives broken open. While I haven't been through a divorce myself, I walked with my friend through his, and I have observed in our culture the pain and uncertainty that divorce brings to all who are close to it.

This morning's scripture looks at divorce in two ways, through the eyes of Jewish law and through the eyes of God. Let's begin with the law . . . a number of weeks ago we heard the story of King Herod's complicated family dynamics that led to the beheading of John the Baptist. John was put in prison because he criticized Herod for marrying his brother Philip's wife . . . Herodias had to divorce Philip in order to marry King Herod. So when the Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce, their question doesn't come out of nowhere . . . they're listening carefully for where Jesus comes down on Herod's marital status. Jesus, of course, sees this coming a mile away and isn't interested in weighing in, though is up for a bit of a debate . . . leading them through the Law of Moses to his only real concern . . . God's heart.

The Law of Moses does allow for divorce, but why? Jesus argues that Moses wrote it into the law for the hard-hearted, but required a proper procedure in order to protect women whose only security in life is their spouse. This is the core issue of the day – one cannot just abandon one's spouse for another in a culture where it is the responsibility of male family members to protect women and children.

Jesus then goes deeper, back to the story of creation (which traditionally Moses wrote), back to the story in Genesis I told earlier. You noticed I gave it a little update since we know now that biology and gender, love and marriage are more complex than this binary account of male and female. 'God made these first two humans, who God found to be different, yet complementary. God continues to make humans in great variety, and when two humans see they are complimentary and want to commit to each other, God brings them together and blesses them as one.' God's love blesses relationships and blesses unions. As is often said in marriage ceremonies, these unions are not to be entered into lightly, for we not only make commitments to each other and to God, when we make a covenant, it is our very lives and hearts that come together. Separating, therefore, is extremely painful.

And so we wonder, because divorce is not uncommon in our culture and even among Christians and in our very community, what is God's relationship to divorced people? People get divorced for all kinds of reasons, not just because of the hardness of heart. Moreover, it is a painful reality to know the life you know will be taken apart piece by piece, regardless of your position. But while God blessed unions from the beginning of creation, God's love and compassion, God's grace and mercy came even before creation. God's heart knew grace even before God made the world and everything in it. God's grace is more fundamental than any law. God stands with us in grace and mercy even as we disassemble something God blessed. We see God's mercy in every covenant the Israelites ever broke – they turned against God for years at a time . . . and each time God gathers them up and makes a new covenant, a new promise that God will be with them always, without fail. This is the difference between the Law and God's heart.

I think it's beautiful and amazing that Mark goes on to include these verses about the blessing of children right after this teaching on divorce. Children in Jesus' day are the least of these and Jesus honours them here for their unique ability to open doorways to God's Kingdom.

My favourite thing about holiday gatherings at their best is all of the generations together: interacting, cooking, learning, playing together. My grandpa taught my sister and me chess and poker at our holiday table after dinner while the rest of the adults had their boring conversations. He would teach us how to do card tricks with trick decks and tell us the same stories year after year until I could practically tell them myself. We were children, full of energy, curiosity, and ideas – he was old and wise . . . surely we glimpsed God's Kingdom there.

We gather year after year and sit around our holiday tables that are imperfect, yet holy, changing, yet blessed. God blesses the moments of joy and is with us as family dynamics unfold. God blesses the gaps in the table where loved ones used to sit, and blesses the holes in our hearts, that one day we may be whole again. Thanks be to God.