

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 10:2-16

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Jesus' words about divorce are highly conservative and they are the hardest ruling in regard to that issue in the first century rabbinic tradition. The Hillel school, which was the more liberal of the schools of first century rabbinic law, gave a number of reasons why it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. The Shammai school was more conservative and would only allow divorces in cases of adultery or mitigating circumstances that made it very difficult to maintain the marriage. Jesus here follows the Shammai tradition, which is modified by Matthew and Luke in a more liberal direction. Jesus' interpretation of divorce law to his disciples is a distinctive Markan tradition. In Mark, Jesus allows no exceptions, therefore, no possibility of lawful divorce.

On the one hand, these are hard words. Here Jesus defines divorce and remarriage as adultery. This is a very restrictive prohibition of divorce that addresses what is in many instances the motive behind a divorce, namely to marry another. That possibility is also named in this tradition as a violation against the law. On the other hand, Jesus' spirit in this teaching is a spirit of celebration of the orders of creation that God established. It is a spirit of celebration that God made humans male and female and provided that a man and a woman would join together becoming one flesh. Jesus' attitude in relation to divorce, while tough, is also celebrative. Therefore, the way in which this ruling about divorce can be told is compassionate and joyful.

The story of the children is another part of this section in which Jesus addresses the dynamics of families and of the relationships between parents and children. In this story, people (presumably mothers) were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might touch them. The disciples rebuke them. The translation in the NRSV "spoke sternly" does not adequately communicate what they were doing. They were keeping the children away from Jesus and were rebuking the parents for trying to get the children to Jesus. When Jesus saw it, he was *angry*. "Indignant" doesn't quite make it in terms of the degree of hostility toward the disciples that is implied in the Greek word. The tone of Jesus' words is angry, "Let the little children come to me! Don't stop them!"

The structure of this story is the same as Jesus' instructions to his disciples when they have done something with which he disagrees. The disciples rebuke someone for something they think they shouldn't do in relation to Jesus. Jesus then gives commands to his disciples about what they are to do or not to do. These imperatives are followed by an explanation of his command introduced with the Greek word *gar* (usually translated "for"). Finally there is a pronouncement introduced by the formula, "Truly I tell you." In this instance, the commands are, "Let the little children come to me. Don't stop them." The explanation is, "For as to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." The pronouncement is, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it."

The translation in the NRSV, "as a little child" does not mean, literally, that you have to have entered the kingdom of God when you were a child. It's a metaphor. To avoid confusion, a better translation uses a clear simile: " Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God *like* a little child will never enter it."

The warmth of this ending is that Jesus takes the children in his arms and lays his hands on them and blesses them. It's a word of love and intimacy that Jesus establishes with children. It is the model for "Children's Moments" in worship, for Sunday School and other aspects of children's ministry, and for parents loving and holding their children. This story has had a very positive impact on the treatment of children over the centuries.