

A Radically Different World (Mark 10:2-16)

I remember after class one time in graduate school at U of L, two of my female classmates approached me to ask if I was going to the parking garage and, if so, if they could walk with me. I said, "Of course."

The class got out well after dark, and the parking garage was across campus. So we walked together in the dark.

When we got to the parking garage, I walked both my friends to their cars, waiting until they drove off. Nobody made a big deal out of it, but it struck me that there are some things I take for granted about the way the world operates that many other people can't afford to be so casual about.

After I'd left my friends at their cars, I started walking to mine. On the way, while still reflecting on my female classmates, I noticed another woman walking toward me. And I started thinking, "I'll bet she has to size me up as a potential threat. She

doesn't know if I am or not, but she can't afford to take too many chances. I'm a pretty good-sized guy, kind of scruffy-looking. At the time, I still had long hair and a beard and was wearing a black leather jacket. She didn't know me."

And then I had a shocking thought: "I bet I look kind of scary in a lonely parking garage at night." But in my mind, that can't be right. Because you see, in my personal narrative, I'm the **good** guy. I'm the guy who helps little old ladies catch their dogs and put their groceries in the trunks of their cars. I don't waylay unsuspecting strangers. I don't scare college girls in parking garages at night. But the young woman approaching me in this parking garage didn't know that. And she believed, as she crossed to the other side, that she couldn't really afford to take the chance.

I could see it in the way her eyes darted about. And it made me so sad, knowing that even trying to allay her fears would only heighten her sense of danger. I attempted a smile, but she

hurried by me in the opposite direction, her heels clicking in a kind of frightened Morse Code only those conditioned to dread the violence of the night can translate.

This new twist in parking garage orienteering led to another thought: “My experience of the world is totally different from that. I can’t remember the last time I felt physically intimidated, like somebody might be trying to figure out whether I was an easy target for brutality. I don’t have to treat each new encounter as a potential threat.”

Now, maybe I’m kidding myself; maybe I **should** have my threat detectors calibrated more finely. But that seems like a really crappy way to have to live—which led to another thought: “That’s the world a lot of people live in every day—one I take for granted means me no harm, but one that always seems fraught with potential violence for many.”

Let's be honest: There's a certain privilege in being a 215 pound straight white guy who often looks like he just walked off the set of Sons of Anarchy.

I realize the privileged hand I was dealt before I ever so much as took my first gulp of air. I didn't do anything to earn the deference our culture pays to people like me, so I'm not going to try to "feel" extra guilty to compensate for it. It is what it is.

On the other hand, I'm also not going to act like my privilege doesn't exist. I must be constantly aware of the fact that other people's experiences of the world are different from mine and that my experience shouldn't be held up as the standard against which other people's lives are measured. In fact, I have to be willing to let the experiences of those I've too often casually assumed existed on the margins move to the center—to completely rethink what the margins might look like if people like **me** existed there—instead of the people who've for too long lived on the edges.

As a White parent, for example, I don't have to have "the conversation" with my son about how not to provoke the police.

I don't have to worry that somebody's following me around the Target to make sure I don't swipe a toaster or something.

I'm not constantly beset by the nagging suspicion that people think I got my job not because I'm qualified for it, but because of my race.

As a straight person, I don't have to worry about holding my beloved's hand in public, or if because I do, I'll be thrown out into the street.

As a middle-class American, I generally don't have to worry about whether I should pay the mortgage or buy the kids some food. Heck, the fact that I **have** a mortgage sets me apart as one of the lucky ones.

As a semi-scary-looking guy, I generally don't have to wonder if I'm being targeted as a victim of sexual assault when I walk through a poorly lit parking garage at night.

Moreover, I don't have to worry whether a building is accessible to someone with my physical abilities.

I don't have to spend time considering whether simple encounters will raise the question of whether or not I have the proper documentation to live and work here.

I don't live in fear that my children will be taken from me and locked up.

I never have to worry that the cashier in the grocery store will speak to me in some language other than English.

You see, the thing about privilege isn't just that I can generally avoid unpleasant social situations based on things over which I have no control, but that I don't even have to worry about **being** in unpleasant social situations just because I'm a White, straight, middle class, cisgender, or male. I don't have to factor it in because the world I live in was built for people like me.

But I always have to remember that not everybody has that luxury. I say that I need to remember that not everybody can take so much for granted on purpose here because the Pharisees who approached Jesus in our text for today apparently **forgot** that important piece of social empathy.

The Pharisees in Jesus' immediate world weren't entirely at the top of the social heap, but they were a good ways up it. And the shape of their encounter with Jesus underlines the perils of thinking that any group of people exists at the center of the universe.

The Pharisees approach Jesus with a question: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

Seems simple enough, doesn't it? Yes or no question. No politician's answers. No weasel words. Just tell us.

But if you've spent much time roaming around the Gospels, you know that whenever the religious authorities come to Jesus asking questions, it's not because they're genuinely interested in having a theological discussion with him. Generally speaking, when Jesus is asked a question by the Pharisees, or the Scribes, or the Sadducees, or the chief priests...it's a setup. They're trying to trap him with their clever little word games. Mark even tells us that they're **testing** him.

Fact is, in this case, they're **already** convinced it's lawful for a man to divorce his wife—even before they hear his answer. That particular doctrinal squabble had been settled for a long time.

What was still a matter of debate, however, was under what circumstances it was lawful for a man to seek a divorce.

Can you see the privilege poking through here?

The Pharisees take for granted that a man should be able to obtain a divorce ... because, well, why **wouldn't** he be able to? He's a man, after all. Now, a **woman**, on the other hand ... that's a different story. Do you see the assumptions at work in the question?

They assume as a right that men should be able to divorce their wives. But under what circumstances is it lawful? This is an argument about how much males should have to be inconvenienced by women they no longer want in their lives.

So, how does Jesus respond?

In perfect Jesus fashion, he answers a question with another question: "What did Moses command?"

Mistakenly thinking they're on pretty firm ground, the Pharisees say, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her."

But, as Matt Skinner points out:

The Pharisees neglect to mention a key piece of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which requires a husband to give the certificate of divorce to his ex-wife. Such a document might provide a divorced woman with a defense against rumor and slander. For a majority of women in that culture, survival depended upon being a member of a household. A woman, perhaps with children, without a husband and without a means of explaining why she was unmarried, could be exposed to great risk. The law's provision about the certificate seeks to mitigate that risk, but apparently the Pharisees find that detail not worth noting.

In other words, because marriage was largely an economic relationship between a father and a husband, women in the ancient Near Eastern world experienced amazing vulnerability as a result of a divorce. And the law requiring husbands to give their

wives a certificate of divorce was supposed to protect the most vulnerable among God's people, not to take advantage of them for the sake of **anyone's** convenience.

The Pharisees in our Gospel for this morning take for granted a world built to look after their own needs—that is, the needs of powerful men—without ever considering the needs of those who are most powerless to look after their **own** needs.

Often, this text is taken as Jesus' directions about or reprimands for individuals who divorce. But I would like to suggest that Jesus isn't just offering a legal interpretation about what individuals can be held responsible for when it comes to marriage and divorce. He goes deeper than that to argue that God set down the law as a way of establishing a community whose primary purpose is to protect those who are too often defenseless to stand against the way the world is ordered—which is to say, the way God sees it, this new reign Jesus is busy announcing is decidedly **not** set up to prefer the conveniences of the powerful.

In other words, Jesus offers a vision of God's reign that turns the taken-for-grantedness of those who are privileged on its head and stands beside those who are too easily trampled by folks at the top.

This commitment to a community that looks first after the needs of the most vulnerable, I believe, is why Mark follows this exchange about divorce with a perfectly understandable illustration of what Jesus is getting at.

As Jesus is making his point about the need to protect the powerless in God's new reign, people start bringing their children for Jesus to bless. And, right on cue, the disciples show that they aren't quite tracking Jesus' meaning. They tell the people and their annoying kids to bug off. Can't these people see that Jesus is in the middle of an important conversation and can't really be inconvenienced by a bunch of whiny little ankle-biters?

Mark says, "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.'"

Do you see? In the world God envisions, what we should be protecting are not the entitlements of those who always seem to get box seats to the game of life. Instead, we should be protecting the very lives of those who might otherwise be trampled by the powerful.

The easy thing, the seemingly natural thing, is to secure the advantages of a world built with people like us in mind. But if we're concerned about participating in the world announced by the unfolding reign of God, the question we ought to be asking should never be: "Is it lawful for me to disregard people who don't have the same advantages as me? Which is to say, whose problems do we get to ignore?"

As followers of Jesus, the questions we must ask are: “To what extent are we helping to build a community that welcomes the vulnerable and provides healing to the brokenhearted? How do we help to transform a world built for people like **us** into a place that thinks first of those born **without** the same privileges?

How do we stand with Jesus against a world that too often tramples the best interests of women and the needs of children, that regularly ignores the plight of the hungry, the houseless, the addicted, the stranger, and the outcast?”

After all, the world we inhabit wasn’t created just to bless people like us; it was created to carve out space so that all whom God loves can live and flourish with dignity.

And if we want to be like God, our vocation is to learn to participate in such a world—not to try to remake it in our own image.

No question it's a radically different world Jesus imagines—one that wasn't built just for people like us. It's built for everyone—especially those who've experienced only vulnerability in ***this*** world.

But in the end, that's the good news "for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

—Amen.