

Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus 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 this commandment for you. 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.

When I was doing organization development consulting, I learned something that most psychotherapists, physicians and pastors know. And that is that often, what people ask about – the presenting issue – is not always the real issue on their hearts and minds.

My partners and I worked with a group of doctors who hired us to help them with what they described as a “civil war” over money. It took us weeks to understand that the underlying frustration revolved not around money, but around respect. I worked with a high-tech executive who hired me because, she complained, her staff never told her anything. With some probing, we learned that conflict made her so nervous that she was, in fact, avoiding conversations.

Religious people aren’t immune. Frustrations with a spouse can hide under arguments about a garden. Anxiety about work or a bad medical diagnosis can surface as criticism of a vestry decision. A group of people feeling a threat to their status and social conventions – let’s say they are Pharisees – might ask a loaded question about divorce: “Is it lawful?”

And to get to the heart of the matter, Jesus skillfully sidestepped their presenting question about divorce without dismissing or trivializing the issue. “What did Moses command you?” Now, first century Pharisees know more about what Jesus is talking about than most 21st

c. Christians. They know that the law God gave to Moses allowed divorce for very specific reasons.

First, a man could divorce his wife for adultery. Another law, actually written to govern the treatment of servants, allowed divorce for neglect and abuse. A related law said that if a man sold his daughter as a servant and her new master favors her as a wife for his son, the master must grant her the rights of a daughter.

And if that son then married an additional wife, he must not deprive the first wife of her food, clothing and love, as this was a form of spousal neglect. If the husband did not provide her with these three things, then she could divorce him. The rights of a spouse to faithfulness, attention and care, food, clothing and love remained Jewish law for centuries.

Until a controversial innovation showed up.

About the time that Jesus was born, a new type of divorce for “any cause” came into fashion. A man could now divorce his wife without proving that she been unfaithful, neglectful or abusive. All she needed to do was burn dinner. Or refuse to patch his cloak. *Any cause.*

Matthew’s Gospel adds something that Mark’s listeners would have inferred: “Is lawful to divorce one’s wife *for any cause?*” The Pharisees are asking Jesus if the “any cause” innovation is legitimate.

Jesus responds by reminding them that unity and well-being were God’s original intent from the beginning of creation. Then he explains to his followers that divorces based on “any cause” were invalid and so anyone who used it and remarried would be committing adultery. Torah allows divorce *only* for infidelity, neglect or abuse.

Jesus has on his mind one of the most prominent divorces in Jewish history: the divorce between YHWH and Israel. The prophets, you see, frequently refer to the often-turbulent relationship between God and the ancient Northern Kingdom of Israel and her sister, the Southern Kingdom of Judah, as a marriage.

In Jeremiah, God told the prophet that God had given Israel, the Northern Kingdom, her certificate of divorce because she had been unfaithful; giving her love and goods to other gods. God told the prophet Hosea to rebuke his mother-country Israel using the words spoken at a public divorce ceremony: “for she is not my wife and I am not her husband.” God asks the prophet Isaiah, “where is your mother’s certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away?”

After God divorced the Northern Kingdom, the people were assimilated into the Assyrian Empire and disappeared. The Babylonians captured the Southern Kingdom of Judah who were also unfaithful to God, but in time, they repented and returned to right relationship with God. They softened their “hard-heartedness.”

The Pharisees also know all this history. They were, after all, expert and accurate explainers of Jewish law. And they were also the innovators who created or revised laws according to the needs of the time. It was the Pharisees who had created a legal loophole that effectively created two separate grounds for divorce: one for adultery and the other “for any cause.”

And while these distinctions are not trivial, Jesus is thinking about something else; something larger. He is concerned that they may be creating another rift in their union with God. He sees the original unitive consciousness of creation slipping away from them.

And *that* is the underlying issue.

Separation thinking is drawn to surfaces where loopholes and institutional priorities can lead to rationalizations, exclusions and disconnections. Unitive thinking, on the other hand, abides in the depths of mutuality, solidarity and communion.

And marriage is a sacramental symbol of unitive awareness. God joins two whole individuals into a mystical union of “not two, not one” – the essence and image of God. God *is* love and, as Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich insisted, love is the ultimate power of union, the ultimate victory over separation, the power that drives everything that is toward everything else there is.

When people live in unitive awareness, the individual and discrete aspects of themselves – their surfaces, their bodies and the artifacts of their lives – come together in union. Their physical inter-mingling reflects, reveals and influences the inner, psychospiritual truth of communion. Distinct surfaces reflect and reinforce unitive depths.

Divorce, on the other hand, reveals separation awareness; a breaking apart. Unlike God’s love, human love is like other creations that can die. Human unity can fail, leaving two individuals in a relationship where they cannot flow and merge and grow.

And so, Jesus speaks his piece about this newly established loophole, leaving room for our human frailties. And then, instead of laying out the various fine points of his argument, he redirects our

attention. He reminds his followers that only those who receive the reign of God's heaven like children will be able to enter it.

The shift is not random.

Because just as marriage symbolizes unity between people in communion with each other, a child symbolizes the unity of a person in communion with God. And *that* unity has been on Jesus' mind all along.

His followers may have still been uneasy about social conventions because of the recent conversation with the Pharisees. Children, in the ancient world, were not important and so had no business being touched by Jesus.

And so, for the second time, Jesus tells his followers explicitly that only by embracing a child as an example of citizenship in the reign of God can we receive the consciousness of Christ and through that, the consciousness of God.

Jesus is not advocating for adults to *literally* think like a child by abandoning all that we have learned and experienced. All that can be brought forward as we relax into an open state of unknowing. That's how we open our minds like children of God.

In a state of unguarded vulnerability, we can receive God's presence and rest in our union with God rather than relentlessly pursuing more knowledge. And that, ironically, opens us to a fuller understanding the mystery.

We can strip ourselves of our *attachments* to every material thing, every social construct, every institutional order until, like Job, all that remains is an awareness of God's Formless Presence.

By adapting the openness of a child of God, we can receive Christ consciousness with trust and become aware of our unity with God, the ultimate Source, Consciousness and Life of all creation. We experience ourselves as more than our circumstances, transcending and including our physical, social, moral and mental natures.

Jesus, the Beloved Son of God, embraces children as siblings. He names children, his sisters and brothers, as pathways to the reign of heaven. Jesus is an awakened child of God rousing the still-sleepy children of God. And then, enfolding them in his loving arms, he touches them, makes them whole and blesses them.

Regardless of their surface distinctions, their social standing, the complexity of their thinking, children of God "such as these" can receive the presence of the Holy One and live in unity with God and at peace with each other.

Jesus invites us...no, that's not right...Jesus *implores* all of his followers – even you and me – to embrace the pathway of the children of God, to enter God's domain. And then to bring back a little of the light that we find there to share with other sleeping children of God.

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