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By Janet Foggie

Introduction

This section of the gospel begins with Jesus on the move. 'He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them.'

Jacob wrestled with God, and this is a text with which I find myself wrestling. Reading it through do you find these words challenging? Or comforting? Do they conform with your view of morality in relationships or not?

Jesus was teaching on the move; are we, as Christians, on the move too as the early disciples were? Or is it our Christian duty to try to root all our social interactions in the one locus, in the morality and social customs of Jesus' time?

Text

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 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.

What was marriage to Jesus? This isn't an easy question to answer. Clearly in this text marriage is about heterosexual households. He speaks about leaving the household of a father and mother and setting up a household as a man with a wife. The household or oikonomos was a financial, social and ethical unit. It is from the Greek word for a house that we get our words for economy and economics. If we look at Proverbs 31 the picture of a good wife is of an individual who runs the economic unit that was an iron-age home. She is up early, goes to market, runs things efficiently and turns a profit. A father seeking out a wife for his son, in this model, was more like recruiting a catering and services manager with agricultural skills.

In her book 'Doughnut Economics', Kate Raworth argues that the labour of many women is a crucial part of the economy, and yet because it is not part of the monetary economy invented by men it is rarely valued. The married women in Jesus' time were used as economic pawns in a social system that did not enable them to choose their sexual partner, nor choose their employment, and in which they did not own the proceeds of their labour.

If we look at Jesus' compassionate attitude to women elsewhere, especially those not treated well by this socio-economic use of women as sexual partners and home-managers, such as the Syro-Phoenician woman or the woman at the well, we see a man who is aware of the low status of women and yet also sees their humanity for what it is.

In which case, maybe when he speaks about 'hardness of heart' he is referring to the system in which women are not free in any sense of freedom we would understand today.

If a person in modern society wished to model their ethics of marriage on the marriage of Jesus' day that would be to take on a system of arranged marriages without women's right to choose in which those women had no education, no property rights, no feminine sanitation, no access to contraception and no freedom of movement. Perhaps some would advocate a 'back to the bible' return to this system.

For most Christians in the Western world, it is unthinkable to have a society which would treat women in this way. Where we do find such a society, we speak out against it. This leaves us with a difficult text. Jesus' teaching on divorce was predicated on a society where a man divorcing a woman (and she hadn't had necessarily had much choice in accepting him) was the end of her reputation, her business, her income, her social standing and the end of her relationship with her children. In this situation, divorce was as much an abuse of an unfree individual as marriage was. Does this mean Jesus would say the same thing if he were teaching a crowd in the shopping mall today?

Jesus spoke to their 'hardness of heart'. Another challenge out of this reading is whether we can follow Jesus without hardness of heart; in loving acceptance of all faithful relationships, gay or straight, whether married, co-habiting, or civil partnerships. Where choice is an active element in any and every relationship sometimes the choice to divorce is definitely and clearly the right choice for an individual. The context of modern choice may well change our view of this teaching by Jesus on divorce. Can we soften our hearts to hear his word to us today?

‘Thanks to the last 100,000 years of evolution that fine-tuned *Homo sapiens*, we humans don’t find it easy to think in terms of complex systems. For millennia, people lived relatively short lives in small groups, learned from quick feedback (put your hand in fire: it gets burned) and had little impact on their wider surroundings.’

[Kate Raworth, ‘Doughnut Economics’ (Random House 2017) p.130]

Does this describe the people of first century Palestine, the audience Jesus’ was speaking to directly? If not, why not?

How do you think this quote enables us to understand the bible better in a complex age?

What does it mean to be a Christian in the modern world, at home, at work, online?

OR

Take a walk around a city or village, try to say hello to every person who passes you. Take note of their appearance, age, any features about them that seem unique. There are 7,000 million people in the world today, and that number is growing, yet each one is distinctive. Think about the child Jesus placed before his disciples. What would that child have looked like? What was the gender of the child in your mind’s eye? What did the disciples learn from focusing on that one particular individual?

Prayer

In our humanity; we seek Jesus the human teacher.

In our complexity; we reach for faith to reassure.

In our doubts; we grab certainty in simplicity.

Eternal God, be with us

in a world that is dynamic, unstable and unpredictable

let our judgements not force inequality on others.

Speak not to our hardness of heart

but to our softness.

AMEN

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Argument and Anger