

Sticky Wicket

It is not often that I dread approaching the Scripture for a Sunday morning. My inclination is usually to preach from the gospel passage. As I mentioned introducing the Mark text, this is a text that is termed “hard”, “painful” or “difficult” in many commentaries. It is not unique because there are several things which Jesus teaches which are hard for us because we do not like what they say to or about us. In our current culture the topic of marriage is so emotionally charged that rational discussion fails. I thought seriously about avoiding this passage for that very reason—because of reactions given to the Supreme Court decision, the changes in PC (USA) polity to the uproar surrounding Kim Davis—people take stands and read into Scripture what they believe. That is why I termed these texts a sticky wicket. I am not sure where I became aware of that term—in fact, I don’t know enough about the sport from which it is derived to appreciate the nuance of it. But the definition I found is this: it is a metaphor used to describe a difficult circumstance. It originated as a term in cricket caused by a damp or soft pitch. And what I want to do with this text is talk about the underlying concern which connects the Genesis passage to the end of the Mark passage and includes the beginning concern of the Pharisees about lawfulness and the ending where Jesus gathers the little children to himself. I do not intend to actually address the added baggage which current issues have added to the concept of marriage or the ones related to divorce that were so controversial for my parents. But because the gospel text frames the deeper message within these topics, I will try to discuss them through the lens that Scripture and historical context provides. Although we often begin our understanding of marriage with one of the verses from the Genesis passage which I read, I am going to begin by opening what I see as the concept that Jesus was focusing on through the gospel passage. The Mark passage begins with this statement: “Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” The Pharisees were not interested in Jesus’ understanding of marriage, but what his response to a question about the law would be. Their question was phrased as a test; a test to see if he supported the law. Jesus as we find customary answered their question with one of his own. “What did Moses command you?” Since Jesus and the Pharisees both knew that Moses had stated a

“commandment” regarding divorce, there really wasn’t a question about whether divorce was lawful or not under Mosaic Law. Moses’ statement on divorce begins with Deuteronomy 24:1 which reads: Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house. That was all it took for a man to divorce a woman. The following verses continue to describe scenarios involving this woman and a succession of events where successive husbands find something objectionable about her and she is divorced again. The issue in the law for the Pharisees which was a matter of debate at the time was what constituted cause for divorce. What constituted “something objectionable” which allowed for divorce? There were two schools of thought about divorce in Jesus’ day—both schools thought that a man had a right to put away, dismiss, or divorce his wife. One school felt that only unfaithfulness by the wife was cause for this action. The other school felt that it could be done for any number of reasons, for anything which displeased the husband. Whether the conditions were strict or lenient, the consequences for the woman were devastating—she suffered familial and social disgrace, potentially severe economic hardship and limited future prospects for her and her children. In that culture a wife was property and had no value other than that given to her by father or husband. As a side note, a woman had no way to divorce a husband. So what the Pharisees are testing Jesus about is a legal judgment based on Mosaic Law. Yet if you listen carefully, you will notice that Jesus did not give them a legal judgment on divorce, but instead turns the question on its head. He shifts the conversation from legal to relational categories. He refers back not to Deuteronomy and the Mosaic Law as the authoritative statement about marriage, but to the passage from Genesis. According to Jesus, the law given by Moses was there because of the hardheartedness of man. It was a concession to human weakness. Jesus turns the conversation away from the legal foundation for divorce to God’s design for marriage when he tells the Pharisees that “from the beginning God made them male and female”. It is from that passage that we take the basis for marriage vows. But we don’t often consider the verses surrounding this endorsement of two becoming one. In the opening chapter of Genesis we have the description of creation which is most often quoted. In it, man is the last creature

formed by God before God calls all creation good and rests. In that first description we have the first part of Jesus' rebuttal of the Pharisees. But the remainder of Jesus' quote comes from the second creation story. In it, God forms a creature from dirt, and names him Ah'dam which is Hebrew for earthling. It is after Adam's formation that God makes a garden and places him in it. Genesis 2: 15: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and to keep it." But unlike Genesis one where birds, fish, and all the animals were formed before mankind, in this narrative a man is formed first and given instructions about the plants including the one he is not to eat of. "Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." A Hebrew dictionary will yield the term counterpart as the translation instead of partner used in the NRS or suitable one in other translations. It is this creation of a counterpart for Adam that gives us the scene where Adam names all the other living creatures God made and brought before him. This is also the place where we find that woman is created from Adam. Whatever interpretations have come from this second creation narrative about the institution of marriage, it seems clear that the concern of God was about relationship. God's view was that man should not be alone. God's desire throughout Scripture focuses on the need for human beings to live in community and to care for one another. It is this view of relationship which Jesus brings forth in his interaction with the Pharisees. The question posed by the Pharisees focused on the man's right, Jesus' concern was with the vulnerability of the woman being set aside. When the disciples question Jesus about what he has said to the Pharisees, he says nothing about the partner rejected in the divorce but speaks instead of those who would seek to set aside a partner for another. In other words, his strongest words are against those who initiate divorce as a means to get something else as names both man and woman equally. And the terms he uses indicates that adultery committed by a man is committed against the woman—not as the Deuteronomy texts indicate as being against the woman's father or past husband. In Jesus' words, the woman is not transferred property. Jesus' words seek to provide protection for the vulnerable. For many years the position in Mark of the passage about welcoming children which follows the treatment of divorce seemed to me disconnected from it. Yet in Mark the placement of events is never casual. It is not a coincidence that this text about Jesus blessing children. Unlike our

context where the culture places a high value on children, in the ancient world children had few rights and essentially no social value. Therefore the disciples obstruct people who bring children to Jesus for blessing. Jesus welcomes them because he has concern for the vulnerable and scorned, those who are likely to be exploited. We often view this passage as indicating that a child-like faith is required to enter God's kingdom. Yet the translation could just as easily be translated as Welcome the kingdom like you would welcome a child. Why is this a better translation? It fits better with the passages which go before. In the culture of Jesus' time where honor and shame were decisive factors in determining behavior. People would welcome eagerly someone of high status because it would increase their own status. Children and women with low status and welcoming them would have no value. Jesus is stressing again that God's kingdom welcomes those who are on the edges of humanity. For Mark, any outsider marginalized by ritual, tradition, ethnicity, race, religion, gender will find welcome in God's kingdom. This is consistent. It is also true that in referring back to the creation story Jesus is reminding us that to be human is to be in relationship, whatever that relationship might look like. To be marginalized is to be alone. Jesus was not interested in the lawfulness issue, he was concerned with those who were rejected or not valued by the culture. Perhaps that is where we too should direct our concern, not with legality but with how it is our relationship with one another which concerns God. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.