

## **Faithfulness**

Mark 10:2-16

October 7, 2012

Did you know there was a Mrs. Jesus?

Well, a Harvard professor says it's possible anyway, or, at least, that there were some early Christians who thought that Jesus was married. Several weeks ago, Dr. Karen King announced her translation of the writing on a small piece of papyrus written in the Coptic language to which she had been given access. The papyrus, which she dates to the fourth century, contains a line in which Jesus refers to "my wife."

What if Jesus were married? Now you need to understand that the papyrus has not yet been carbon-dated and some scholars believe it to be a modern forgery, and, in any case, a single line written three hundred years after Jesus lived by an Egyptian author can hardly be said to prove that Jesus was married. Indeed, in the centuries that followed Jesus' death, there were a whole host of writings that told some pretty strange stories and made all kinds of bizarre claims about the things Jesus said and did.

But what if it were true? What if Jesus did have a wife? Would that be a problem for you? Would it upset your faith? Is there anything essential to your belief about Jesus that depends on him not being married?

Why couldn't Jesus have been married? Our gospels make it abundantly clear that Jesus was fully human, that he shared with us all the various aspects of our life -- physical and emotional and spiritual. Do we feel a need to say that Jesus shared everything with us except ... this one thing? Except having a wife, because sex is somehow off limits to him? Because sex is somehow less than holy? But sex is God's gift, a part of the life God intends for the creatures made in his own image, a part of the wholeness -- and the holiness -- of what it means to be human.

Jesus attended weddings and Jesus attended dinner parties and Jesus was accused by some of being a glutton and winebibber. That's certainly an exaggeration, meant to highlight the differences between him and religious leaders like John the Baptist who fasted and drank no wine. Nevertheless, the fact is that Jesus and his disciples did eat and drink and socialize. So why couldn't Jesus have been married?

Why not?

Even so, I personally do not believe that Jesus was married, because there is no evidence, no real evidence, that he was, and because the gospels make no such reference. But, more importantly in my mind, I don't think Jesus would have married because he was not about giving his whole self to just one other person. He gave his whole self to all, to each person he encountered.

To each person, man or woman, fisherman or tax collector, rabbi or prostitute, he opened the door to the deepest levels of honesty and intimacy and personal relationship. He was a human being, yes, but his life was about connecting with each and every human being, so they might, through him, be connected to God.

I don't know. We don't know. We don't know if Jesus was not married or was. But does it matter?

We do know Jesus talked about marriage. But unlike some churches that seem to make conduct in marriage and family relationships the focal point of their faith practice, Jesus really didn't have that much to say about marriage. It was not one of the main themes of his gospel proclamation. In fact, Jesus talked about marriage only when somebody else brought it up!

Like this time. Some Pharisees came to Jesus and tried to trap him with a question: "Does our Law allow a man to divorce his wife?"

Now I have puzzled hard over this this week trying to figure out how they intended to trap him. How is this a trap question? Maybe you can tell me! Or maybe just asking a public figure to state an opinion about a hot button social issue is always a trap. Whatever you say is bound to make somebody mad!

Divorce was a hot button issue for the Jews. Their religious leaders debated the circumstances under which divorce should be permitted, but, in any case, what was true was that among the Jews getting a divorce was not at all difficult ... for a man!

Jesus' answer could not be more clear. If they were setting him a trap, he boldly stepped right into it! First he asked them to tell him the law and they gave their answer: "Moses gave permission for a man to write a divorce notice and send his wife away." To which Jesus told them: "Moses gave you that law only because you are such blockheads!"

Actually what he said was, "because you are so hard to teach," but it means the same thing!

And then Jesus gave his own answer to their question: “No human being must separate what God has joined together.” Jesus’ answer to their question is ... no! Never! Under no circumstance!

Later when his disciples asked him to elaborate, Jesus said: “A man who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against his wife [and] a woman who divorces her husband and marries another man commits adultery.”

Now you might be thinking what they were surely thinking: This is too hard for us! This teaching is too hard for us! What about ...? What if ...?

It is hard. It is hard because of our human weakness and frailty, but be clear that it was the Pharisees who brought up the subject, and that Jesus isn’t going to let himself be sucked into a debate about the “ifs” and “whens” of divorce. Jesus is talking, not so much about divorce, and maybe not even so much about marriage, not about laws and rules, but about virtues, about the virtue of faithfulness.

Jesus is talking about faithfulness. And faithfulness is too hard for us. We are, by nature, whimsical, changeable, moody, impulsive, forgetful, unreliable. I may know what I feel and want today, but who knows how I’ll feel or what I’ll want or who I’ll be tomorrow?

That’s why it’s so preposterous to make two people stand in front of witnesses and make promises about being faithful to each other as long as they both shall live! It’s preposterous! How can we humanly expect them to make such promises?

We can’t ... humanly, by nature. But if faithfulness is too hard for us, it is not too hard for God. God is faithful. God keeps promises. God’s will does not waver and his intentions do not change.

Faithfulness may not be humanly possible, but it is one of God’s gift to us, one of the fruits of the work of God’s Spirit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control.

Faithfulness is one of God’s best gifts to us. Faithfulness introduces to us a level of shared life and intimacy and oneness we could never experience otherwise. Faithfulness opens our lives up to a abundance of rich blessings and profound joys, blessings and joys that we are both able to receive and to give. I am talking about the blessings and joys of faithfulness in marriage, yes, but also and especially about the blessings and joys in faithfulness above and beyond marriage, in all human relationships and in our relationship with God.

Faithfulness is one of God's best gifts to us because it is one of the best ways we reflect in our own selves the One who made us. When we are faithful -- to our husbands, to our wives, to our employers, to our employees, to our children, to our parents, to our friends, to our church family -- we show evidence of the One at work in us. When we make promises and keep them, we make all the more believable the reality of the God who makes promises and keeps them.

And when we are faithful, we fulfill one of God's highest intentions for us. God made us for companionship, for relationship, for intimacy, for oneness. God made us for oneness with him, and God made us for oneness with each other.

*And the two will become one ...*

That is true of marriage, but marriage is merely the model, the paradigm, for what God intends for all human relationships. God calls us to be faithful to all our brothers and sisters, to all our neighbors, to all his children, to make and keep our promise to love them as we love ourselves as long as we live!

God calls us into oneness, to be joined to each other as people, as groups of people, and even as nations, to be joined to each other by being joined alike to Christ. In Christ, we are one, and no one must separate what God has joined together!

So the real question is not was Jesus married, or to whom was Jesus married? No, the real question is, to whom is Jesus married? And you know the answer! Jesus is married ... to us!

Jesus is married to his church in Waterloo, Iowa ... and to his church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and to his church in Bogota, Columbia, and to his church in Seoul, South Korea, and to his church in Beijing, China, and to his church in St. Petersburg, Russia, and to his church in ...