

Couples: Mark 10:2-16

by [Andrew Warner](#) in the [October 3, 2006](#) issue

In a few weeks voters in six states will decide on state constitutional amendments that will bar same-sex marriage and any other legal recognition of same-sex couples. Most mainline denominations have come out against the amendments even though some of them do not allow same-sex couples to wed in their churches. Most evangelicals and Catholics support the amendments.

Both sides would do well to consider Jesus' teaching—not on marriage, but on divorce. In the Markan passage, the Pharisees were seeking to trap Jesus when they asked him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" The setup reminds us of other situations in which people tried to trap Jesus—on occasions when they demanded signs, inquired about taxes or debated resurrection.

Like those questions, the one on divorce had risks on either side. If Jesus approved of divorce he would appear unprophetic or, as John Calvin says, as "a panderer who lends countenance to human lust." But if he spoke against divorce he would risk death. (Herod had recently beheaded John the Baptist, the last prophet to have spoken out against his marriage to the ex-wife of his brother.)

The Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce not out of spiritual concern but because of political calculation. Today much of our debate about marriage comes from a similar hope to score political points. But regardless of the political dimensions, we can inform our discussion of marriage by watching Jesus respond.

As he did with other ensnaring questions, Jesus moved delicately between risky options. He asked the Pharisees to state the law—divorce is legal—and then took a sharp turn into a discussion of God's intention for human relationship—lifelong marriage. Note that Jesus took the question of divorce out of a legal context and moved it into the spiritual arena.

Our national debate about marriage would be richer if we asked just what it is that God intends for us in marriage. We would spend less time asking "who can marry" and more time sharing "why we marry."

Jesus points to the story of Adam and Eve as a lesson in God's intentions for marriage. Theirs is a Rorschach-test marriage. Do we see Adam and Eve as procreators of humanity, so that the intention of marriage is children? Or do we see them as complementary creations, representing the necessity of biological difference?

In my congregation we look to Adam and Eve's Edenic partnership as a sign that God's purpose was companionship. Adam and Eve were together because "it is not good that humans should be alone." We see the intention of marriage not as procreation or biological complementarity but as intimate companionship. The practical consequence of this view is that our congregation has been celebrating same-sex marriages for almost two decades.

Yet marriage does not exist only for companionship or procreation or complementarity. It has a cruciform shape, like other ascetical practices, and is a transformative experience for the two individuals. In marriage, God intends not only to alleviate human loneliness but to effect human salvation.

Like ascetical disciplines such as fasting or celibacy or poverty, marriage involves saying no to something in order to say yes to a higher good. Marriage is based on renunciation and reception: one says no to many possible partners in order to say yes to one. One renounces some behaviors in order to be drawn closer to God in covenant relationship.

We discover the cross in marriage just as a monastic discovers it in fasting or celibacy or poverty. In marriage we are naked not just physically, but spiritually and emotionally. Our spouse knows us completely, in all our brokenness. Fortunately, in marriage we also see and experience the other side of the cross—the gifts of grace and mercy.

In 2000, my spouse Jay and I adopted a son. Tomas had a difficult time sleeping at night from age one through the whole next year. We tried everything we could think of until a sleep specialist said, "Buy a bed for his room, sleep next to the crib and be there when he wakes up."

As someone who loves his sleep, this year of 3 a.m. wakings slowly and persistently wore me down. By the end of the year my disposition was rotten. To be loved in spite of this, with my evident limits of patience, was an experience of profound grace. I was loved even when I felt broken, and in that I experienced God's love.

When Jay and I were married, we knew that our union would be recognized only in our congregation. This leaves us and other same-sex couples in the unusual position of being the only couples in America wedded without the possibility of divorce. Pastorally, I know this can be messy. Theologically, all of us Christians must wonder why the only couples legally living under Jesus' proscription against divorce are same-sex couples.

For my partner and me this means that we take our vows and our dependence on God's grace seriously. It means trusting my partner enough to raise children without the protection of custody arrangements. We depend on God's grace to forgive and for humility and maturity in our relationship. I am convinced, through my experience, that God is working to transform us through our marriage.

I don't know how the political situation of same-sex marriage will be resolved. Perhaps amendments barring divorce will be next. What matters more than politics, however, is being faithful to God's intentions for us in marriage. That intention is that we humans experience transformative companionship.