

**Psalm 26:6-8** I will wash my hands in innocence, O Lord, that I may go in procession round your altar, singing aloud a song of thanksgiving and recounting all your wonderful deeds. LORD, I love the house in which you dwell and the place where your glory abides. (46)

### Introduction

I was asked before my ordination if I would lie prostrate or kneel, I said, “I’ll lie prostrate.” When the time came, I didn’t. Rather, I knelt, reached behind my head, unclipped my hair, and, with my hair down and around my shoulders, I bowed down my forehead to the ground with arms encircling.

Why did I do that? There’s a passage of scripture that is important to me and formative of my journey with Christ: the sinful woman forgiven and the anointing of Jesus with oil. In the accounts of this encounter, Jesus is anointed by a woman who recognizes that he is here to forgive sins. While all the elite and powerful judge him and challenge him; this woman gets it and she, in her sinfulness, goes to Jesus to thank him, to show love and gratitude to the one who will stand in solidarity with her when no one else will. The sinful woman cast out, discarded by whomever and society, was received and accepted by Christ. And this is what Christ did: went to the fringe and gathered up all the discarded humans and restored them, calling them to him and thus back into community with God.

It was into this divine activity of seeking the discarded I knew I was being ordained. I never wanted to forget the people—desperate to hear the love and solidarity of God for and with them. So, I pulled the story into my ordination to remember once and always: I was called *from* the people *for* the people; that I am as the people to serve the people.

Before I sound too anthropocentric, this call isn’t merely to people, but also to creation. While I love you with my whole heart, I love animalkind with that same love. I feel the pain in my heart when people *and* animals hurt; righteous indignation surges in my mind when humans *and* creation are discarded by other people and society, treated as if they serve and profit us with no livelihood or worth of their own.

This isn’t my doing; this is because God cares a lot about people and animals who are discarded and tossed to the side as if they don’t matter. Being grafted into God’s mission of love in the cosmos means I will give a big damn about how it’s treated.

### Mark 10:2-16

And then the Pharisees were interrogating him—in order to test him—whether it is lawful for a husband to be rid of the wife. Now he answered and said to them, “What did Moses command you?” And they said, “Moses permitted [us] to write a paper of bill of forsaking/divorce and be rid of [the wife]. And then Jesus said to

them, “He wrote this commandment to you because of your hardness of heart.”  
(Mk 10:2-5)<sup>1</sup>

You may wonder why a passage of scripture about “divorce” is in a sermon about how humans and animals are discarded. But bear with me as I attempt to follow our lectionary *and* our feast day of St. Francis with some lexical creativity.

Jesus is approached by some Pharisees and asked about “divorce”—how many translations translate the Greek word in the text, ἀπολύσαι.<sup>2</sup> The Pharisees are like the *law-and-order* guys—being considered the strictest observers of the law.<sup>3</sup> There’s nothing wrong with law and there’s nothing wrong with order; but when both become idols rendering humans subordinate to them, they become problematic. For the Pharisees, obedience to the law was utmost because according to their interpretation of the priesthood of all people, the demand to obey the law and be a holy nation—the bringing of heaven to earth<sup>4</sup>—wasn’t merely on the shoulders of the elders but on all people. The Pharisees were also considered to be the most creative with generating laws flexible to the times—all of it, though, revolved around law and law keeping, the merger of heaven and earth, and the coming of the Messiah.

So, having a law about the permissibility of “divorcing” one’s wife, isn’t far-fetched and is based (loosely) on some of the text held in esteem by the Rabbis received from Moses. When you esteem law and the obedience to law, then when something isn’t working, you can justify it by making a law for it. Thus, “divorcing” the wife wasn’t even questioned; it was completely acceptable and understandable, and justifiable for *any* reason:<sup>5</sup> a “spoiled meal”, “whatever reason”, maybe you just found one “fairer”, or because she wouldn’t “accept your control”. For any of these and other reasons a husband: could “divorce her and **send her away**” (emphasis, mine).

The last part of that statement, “...and send her away”, catches my eye. That’s the part conditioning the thrust of the definition of the Greek word ἀπολύσαι translated as “divorce” in the text. ἀπολύω carries with it the senses: *to be freed from, to free, to release, to send away, to be rid of, to release, to discharge, to disband*. ἀπολύω is where we get the idea of *to ransom*

<sup>1</sup> Translation mine unless otherwise noted

<sup>2</sup> 1pp: ἀπολύω. In our text the verb is an aorist active infinitive.

<sup>3</sup> Josephus. *The Antiquities of the Jews* pp. 13.5.9

<sup>4</sup> See: Jacob Neusner *Invitation to the Talmud: A Teaching Book*, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> RT France *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* NIGTC Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002. 387-8 “While the permitted grounds of divorce were debated in the rabbinic world, the admissibility of divorce (of a wife by her husband, not vice versa: Josephus, *Ant.* 15.259) as such was not questioned: Dt. 24:1-4 (the only legislation relating specifically to divorce in the Torah) was understood to have settled the issue. The more restrictive interpretation of the school of Shammai (only on the basis of ‘unchastity’, *m. Git.* 9:10) was almost certainly a minority view. More typical, probably, is Ben Sira 25:26: ‘If she does not accept your control, divorce her and send her away’, or Josephus’s laconic comment (*Life* 426): ‘At this time I divorced my wife, not liking her behaviour.’ Josephus paraphrases Dt. 24:1, ‘He who wants to be divorced from the wife who shares his home for whatever cause—and among people many such may arise—...(*Ant.* 4.253), and the school of Hillel allowed this to cover a spoiled meal, or even, so R. Akiba, ‘if he found another fairer than she’ (*m. Git.* 9:10).”

and *to redeem*. In a positive sense, we can be redeemed from a debt owed and released into liberty. But in the negative, it can be seen as one person being freed from the burden of another; or as being rid of a wife and releasing her to her own tries at survival, which would be devastating. To be freed from the wife by divorcing her is to discard her and for whatever reason you want. She is now an impure woman with potentially nowhere to go and without livelihood; you may have just thrown her to violent and marauding pack of men clamoring for your life as if her life matters less than your own (ref. Judges 19).

It makes sense that Jesus replies to the Pharisees with the accusation that this law permitting “divorce” is because of the hardness of their heart. To treat another human being (one’s own partner) in such a way as to discard them as if they were nothing but garbage because they ceased to be pretty or accidentally made a bad meal, is hardness of heart toward God.<sup>6</sup> To have a hard heart toward God is synonymous, for Mark’s Jesus, with discarding divine-image-bearing human beings.

### Conclusion

Later in the conversation, Jesus’s disciples are busy rebuking people for bringing little children to Jesus (Mk 10:13). Rebuking. Why? Because children weren’t considered worthy of such a presence; they were sort-of human but not worthy like adults, specifically male adults. Like women, children were lower class human beings and worthy of being discarded just ‘cuz.

And then seeing [this] Jesus was incensed/grieved/indignant and said to them, “You permit (!) the little children to come toward me, do not prevent/hinder them (!), for the kingdom of God is of ones such as these!” (Mk. 10:14-15)

Jesus doesn’t take kindly to getting in the way of people trying to come to him. Jesus doesn’t relish treating other human beings like they aren’t worthy in their own bodies to be near him, like they are discardable, mere trash ready to be taken out. He grew *indignant* because God cares a great deal about human beings. The kingdom of God is for ones such as these; the kingdom of God—brought in Christ—dwells with and among ones such as these.

And not just humankind, but all of God’s creation, from the smallest most miniscule mite crawling upon the ground to the biggest and noblest beasts of the deepest part of the sea; from the smallest grain of sand to the largest and most magnificent mountain. Considering this, can we participate in any system or network or ideology that promotes or encourages the

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<sup>6</sup> France *Mark* 391 “σκληροκαρδία though not in itself frequent in the LXX (Dt. 10:16; Je. 4:4; Ben Sira 16:10; cf. Pr. 17:20; Ezk. 3:7), picks up a frequent OT accusation, mentioning a ‘stiff neck’, that the people of God are hardened against him impervious to his demands. (A similar accusation is expressed in different in 4:12, drawing on Is. 6:9-10; cf. the καρδία πεπωρωμέν of 8:17.) Such language (and σκληροκαρδία in particular) is used primarily of people’s attitude towards God rather than of the way they treat each other. It thus refers here not to men’s cruelty towards their wives, but to their rebellion against God’s will for them. It is such σκληροκαρδία which has led them into divorce in the first place, and made it necessary for Moses to legislate for a situation which was never envisaged in the divine purpose.”

discarding of any part of the creation for our personal gain? No. Being indwelt with the same divine Spirit of God—with which Christ grew indignant—we cannot. We are grafted—by faith and the Holy Spirit—into the great divine mission of love loving the cosmos. Thus, this same spirit will move us to care deeply about others and all creation.

It will lead us to take our place with and among all creation, to echo the words of St. Francis<sup>7</sup>:

Praise be to Thee, my Lord, with all Thy creatures,  
 Especially to my worshipful brother sun,  
 Thee which lights up the day, and through him dost Thou brightness give;  
 And beautiful is he and radiant with splendor great;  
 Of Thee, most High, signification gives.  
 Praised be my Lord, for sister moon and for the stars,  
 In heaven Thou hast formed them clear and precious and fair.  
 Praised be my Lord for brother wind  
 And for the air and clouds and fair and every kind of weather,  
 By thee which Thou givest to Thy creatures nourishment.  
 Praised be my Lord for sister water,  
 Thee which is greatly helpful and humble and precious and pure.  
 Praised be my Lord for brother fire,  
 By thee which Thou lightest up the dark.  
 And fair is he and gay and mighty and strong.  
 Praised be my Lord for our sister, mother earth,  
 Thee which sustains and keeps us  
 And brings forth diverse fruits with grass and flowers bright.  
 Praised be my Lord for those who for Thy love forgive  
 And weakness bear and tribulation.  
 Blessed those who shall in peace endure,  
 For by Thee, most High, shall they be crowned.

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<sup>7</sup> The Writings of Saint Francis of Assisi, newly translated into English with an Introduction and Notes by Father Paschal Robinson (Philadelphia: The Dolphin Press, 1906). [https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/assisi-the-writings-of-saint-francis-of-assisi#StFrancis\\_0535\\_321](https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/assisi-the-writings-of-saint-francis-of-assisi#StFrancis_0535_321)