I had a good friend as a child named Linda. In fact, she was a distant cousin of mine. Linda was a couple of years older than me. Her parents and her brother were really skinny people, but no matter what she did she was round. I remember her father always scolding her – yelling at her that she couldn’t have any candy or cake or chips or any of those things that kids like to eat because she was so fat. She wasn’t really fat, actually, just fuller and curvier than her parents and brother.

As she and I grew up, she continued to struggle with her weight. She wasn’t obese, but she was a solid girl. And she continued to feel guilty every time she ate chocolate even if her Dad wasn’t around.

Many years later in middle age, Linda learned something that changed her life. She learned that those skinny parents had adopted her. She did some research and was able to connect with her birth parents and her natural siblings. And, guess what. They were all solid people, full and curvy like she was. Linda had felt guilty all her life because she was “fat.” All her life she’d thought that if she could just behave better and be more disciplined, she’d be skinny like her parents. Certainly, chocolate contributes to excess weight. But it’s unlikely that Linda would ever have looked like her skinny adopted parents even if she ate nothing but baked fish and vegetables. She felt ashamed of herself when she didn’t need to. She’d felt like an oddball, left out of her skinny family. Now, all of a sudden, she was free from shame and she saw how she fit into this family of other round people.

Many Christians, members of the family of God, feel shame because they’ve been divorced. Perhaps they take passages that teach against divorce as words of condemnation. Perhaps other people or institutions have contributed to this sense of shame by using passages such as this one from Mark as proof texts against divorce and remarriage. This passage, however, merits a closer look. Because just as with other passages we’ve read in the past few weeks from the Gospel of Mark, we can only fully understand it in the context of the culture in Jesus’s day.

In that day, individuals didn’t get married, families did. The wedding stood for the merger of extended families and so a divorce would sever those ties and dishonor the father of the woman. Further, only men could seek divorce in that culture and they could do so for the most frivolous of reasons – burned food, a bad hair day, whatever. Divorced women in that culture generally were turned out to starve. So a man divorcing his wife was tantamount to him either killing her or forcing her into other sexual relationships. Adultery, in those days, didn’t mean having sex with someone who wasn’t your spouse. It meant the wife having sex with a man other than her husband. The husband having sex with other women was not prohibited neither was having more than one wife. [[1]](#endnote-1) The system of divorce then was entirely rigged against women. Jesus is speaking out against divorce as a way to protect women, who were vulnerable members of society, just as were children. [[2]](#endnote-2)

Jesus wants people to take marriage seriously as a lifelong commitment, as we see in the Gospel and in Genesis. But God’s original plan was for the male and female to be equal in that relationship – not for one to be more vulnerable than the other. Even in equal relationships, Jesus understands that people can’t always work out their differences. Sometimes their household becomes one of constant pain and divorce is the only answer. Our God is one of second chances, a God who offers forgiveness and transformation, a God who offers another chance at being happy.

God doesn’t want those of us who have been divorced to spend the rest of our lives in shame, feeling like oddballs, outside the family of God. God doesn’t want us to spend our whole lives thinking that we coulda woulda shoulda. If we did do something wrong that led to the divorce, then we just repent and turn it over to God and don’t keep beating ourselves up. If we didn’t do anything wrong, then we have nothing to repent.

Divorced and remarried or not, God wants us all to feel welcome and loved. God wants us to feel at home among fellow believers, all of whom struggle with some vulnerability and some imperfection. God wants us, like my friend, Linda, to be free from shame. God wants us to realize that we are loved and welcome within the family of God.

With Jesus, there is no shame, only gain.

1. Malina, B. J., & Rohrbaugh, R. L. (2003). Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Second Edition, pp. 188–189). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ian Markham and Samantha R.E. Gottlich in Lectionary Levity: The Use of Humor in Preaching (Church Publishing: 2017) pp 166 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)