

Divorce



Mark 10:2-16

Year B Proper 22

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4
■	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	▲	■	▲	●
▲	Pharisee #1 - the leader of the group of Pharisees and an old adversary of Joanna's	▲			
●	Pharisee #2 - a young, impressionable and idealistic Pharisee	●			
●	Pharisee #3 - a more open-minded Pharisee	▲			
▲	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts		▲	▲	
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)			▲	●
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor			▲	
●	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room				●
●	Jesus				▲

Scene 1

Joanna , Pharisee #1 , Pharisee #2 , Pharisee #3

{A group of Pharisees is preparing to confront Jesus. They knock on the door of the house he's staying in, but Joanna answers it.}

Joanna You!

Pharisee #1 *[with oily sarcasm]* Joanna! How nice to see you.

Joanna *[dishing it right back]* I wish I could say the same.

Pharisee #1 *[with a nasty edge]* How are things in Herod's house? Execute any of your countrymen this week?

Pharisee #2 *[honestly awestruck]* Oh my God! You're the wife of the steward of Herod's house, aren't you?

Joanna *[pointedly]* Chuza and I were the stewards of Herod's house, yes. But as you can see, I'm no longer there.

Pharisee #3 *[thoughtfully]* I heard that you'd joined up with this teacher. *[to Pharisee #1]* Did you know she would be here?

Pharisee #1 *[crossly]* You think I follow her movements? Though Lord knows, I maybe should. She seems to go from serving one enemy of the nation to another!

Joanna *[drily]* I guess you haven't come to join up yourself, then.

Pharisee #3 *[sincerely]* We were hoping to speak with your master about some points of the law.

Joanna Here we go again! All right, what's the trick this time?

Pharisee #2 Trick? I don't understand.

Joanna *[in an explanatory voice]* You ask him a question. Then, no matter what he answers, you twist his words to try to incriminate him. *[to Pharisee #1]* Didn't you brief him?

Pharisee #3 *[sincerely]* I promise you, we're not trying to trick him.

Joanna All right, let's see if that's true. What's your question?

Pharisee #1 *[countering firmly]* Where is your master?

Joanna He's already gone to bed, so you'll have to wait until tomorrow to ask him your innocent question. Or you could practice it on me now.

Pharisee #1 *[to his fellows]* Let's go.

Joanna *[taunting]* What's wrong? Afraid I'll warn him about what's coming? Does the trick only work if he's not ready for it?

Pharisee #3 Honestly, it's not a trick question.

Pharisee #2 This is serious business! We have to make sure his teaching is in accordance with the law. That's our job!

Joanna His teaching about what?

Pharisee #2 Divorce!

Joanna Hah!

Pharisee #1 *[angrily to his fellows]* Now you've done it!

Pharisee #2 What's so funny?

Joanna What's so funny is that your boss and I have discussed this many times before.

Pharisee #3 I take it you two disagree over the subject?

Joanna *[with relish]* About as much as any two people possibly could!

Pharisee #1 The woman is a radical! And paranoid!

Pharisee #2 *[to Joanna]* Then you really don't believe that divorce is legal?

Joanna What? No! I absolutely favor the complete legalization of divorce!

Pharisee #3 *[to Pharisee #1]* But then you...surely you're not opposed. I mean, the law of Moses...

Pharisee #1 *[truculently]* I know the law of Moses! Of course I'm not opposed to it.

Pharisee #2 Then we're all in agreement.

Joanna Hah!

Pharisee #3 I still don't understand a thing! What's the nature of your disagreement? You both believe in the legality of divorce, and it seems your rabbi does, too. And that is in fact the Law. So what's the problem?

Pharisee #1 *[to his fellows with firm finality]* Come on! We're wasting our time here.
[muttering to himself] "It's better to live in a desert than with a contentious woman!"

{They begin to walk away.}

Joanna *[with mock solicitation]* Aw! Don't be that way! I'll tell you what: I won't reveal any of this to the rabbi. When you see him tomorrow, he'll be hearing your question for the first time. I promise!

Scene 2

Joanna , Thomas

{Later that evening, Joanna is puttering around the house humming to herself.}

Thomas You're in a good mood.

Joanna I am!

Thomas May I ask why?

Joanna Oh...I'm looking forward to the rabbi's talk tomorrow.

Thomas Really? Why?

Joanna Oh...I'm hoping he'll really give it to...a former acquaintance of mine...on a certain subject.

Thomas Okay, I'll bite! Who's the acquaintance?

Joanna One of the leaders of the Pharisees. We used to butt heads quite a bit when I was still in Herod's house. I hope the rabbi will be in one of his self righteous moods.

Thomas You usually hate those moods.

Joanna This time, it will have a fitting target.

Thomas Okay, and what's the subject going to be?

Joanna Divorce!

Thomas *[in a little surprise]* Oh! What *about* divorce?

Joanna Whether it should be permitted.

Thomas And our position is...

Joanna That it should!

Thomas Okay. And this Pharisee friend of yours is against it?

Joanna No.

Thomas And now you've lost me again.

Joanna We're both in favor of divorce, but in different ways and for completely different reasons. I believe that people often marry foolishly, and what's more, women have much less choice about who they're going to marry than men. And on top of all that, people change. So there needs to be an out. But that's not what divorce is in our society. For one thing, only men can divorce their wives. For another, the reasons they divorce their wives tend to be horribly self centered: because she's not as pretty as she used to be, or because she didn't bear any sons, or because he's become wealthy and feels like he can "afford" a "better" wife. And finally, a divorced woman is pretty much doomed to poverty, while the men do just fine.

Thomas And yet, it's the law of Moses.

Joanna It's a law written by a man so that his fellow men could continue to act like jerks!

Thomas Well, I suddenly can't wait to hear the rabbi's talk myself! You know, I've never heard him speak on the subject.

Joanna Yeah, me neither.

Thomas Oh, so you talked with him privately about it at some point?

Joanna No, we've never spoken about it before.

Thomas But Joanna...how do you know he's going to take your side against this Pharisee's?

Joanna *[suddenly unsure of herself]* Of course he will. I mean, what's he going to do, uphold the patriarchal status quo? That would be abominable! *[after a short pause]* It would be unlike him to side with the establishment on anything. Wouldn't it? *[suddenly chilled]* Oh Thomas! You don't think he could actually believe in the law as it stands, do you?

Thomas *[gently]* I have no idea. But it's possible, isn't it? I mean, it's happened before, hasn't it? That he's said things that just outraged you? That made you almost leave the group a couple of times?

Joanna Oh my God. If he gets up there and says, "Yes, it's perfectly fine that men can buy, use, and discard women like so much pottery," I don't know what I'll do. *[in somber horror after a pause]* I might really have to leave this time.

Scene 3

James , Joanna , Judas , Thomas

{Jesus and the disciples gather in the house after his confrontation with the Pharisees earlier in the day. Note: although Jesus is in this scene and is addressed from time to time, he doesn't say a word.}

James Great talk today, rabbi! And you sure stuck it to those Pharisees who tried to trip you up.

Thomas I must admit, I was really blown away by your answer. I was actually up all last night thinking about the issue, and your position never even occurred to me.

James You just happened to be up all night thinking about divorce?

Thomas Well, Joanna told me those Pharisees were planning to ask the rabbi about it, and we had a little discussion about it ourselves.

James *[indignant]* Hold on. She knew the ambush was coming didn't warn the rest of us?

Thomas Uh, I guess not.

James Rabbi, did she say anything to you? This is just like her! She thinks that life - that our whole mission - is just one big dinner party, and our enemies are just guests at the table we can chit chat with. She has no idea that we're at *war*.

{Joanna enters in a rage, followed by Judas.}

Joanna *[furiously]* No! I will not calm down!

Judas *[desperately]* At least tell me what's bothering you. We can talk it through.

Joanna Oh, we'll talk it through all right!

James *[annoyed]* Whoa, whoa, whoa! What the heck is going on? Keep it down, will you?

Joanna *[to Jesus]* How could you say what you did! How could you condemn women of Israel - your sisters - and children! - to misery without hope? How could you sit there in your ivory tower and, and -

Thomas *[genuinely surprised]* Joanna, what on earth is the matter?

James *[in a commanding voice]* You can't talk to the rabbi like that! Get out, and don't come back until you can keep a civil tongue!

Joanna *[turning on him]* And what will you do if I don't? Divorce me?

Thomas Is that what this is about?

Joanna Of course that's what this is about! You heard him today. You heard what he said.

Thomas But - but he didn't side with the Pharisees. I thought -

Joanna *[grimly]* No, but what he said wasn't much better.

Judas Could someone please explain to me what's going on here?

Joanna *[turning on Judas]* The fact that you could hear what the rabbi said this morning and then have no idea what the problem might be is precisely "what's going on here!"

Judas *[in good humor, but with a slight edge of irritation]* Actually, what's going on with me is that I wasn't there this morning! So I ask again: could somebody tell me what is going on here?

Joanna *[deflated]* Oh. Sorry.

Judas That's all right. I'm sorry I missed it. What did I miss?

James *[jumping in]* Nothing! That's what's so crazy. She's just flipping out over nothing!

Thomas Well, something did happen. A group of Pharisees showed up to ask the rabbi whether divorce should be allowed.

James Which you knew they were going to do, and you should have warned us!

Thomas I'm kind of glad I didn't, because he handled it just fine, and I really liked his answer.

Judas Divorce! Interesting. *[to Jesus]* What did you tell them, rabbi?

James That God hates divorce!

Joanna That God hates *women and children!*

Judas Hold on, hold on! I'd like to hear what he actually said. Rabbi, what was your answer?

Thomas He didn't answer directly. It was really quite brilliant. He asked them what Moses says about divorce.

Judas The Law allows it, right?

James Right. But the rabbi said the only reason Moses wrote that law was the hardness of the people's hearts. *[waxing eloquent through the end of this speech]* But the real deal is that, from the beginning of the creation, God made us male and female so we could leave our parents and be joined together into one flesh. And no one should separate what God has joined together!

Judas *[carefully to Jesus]* Rabbi, you denigrated the law of Moses?

Thomas I felt he transcended it! He gave a bigger answer than the question called for. It totally threw off those Pharisees.

Judas Well, I don't expect them to remain befuddled for long. The rabbi just gave them some prime ammunition for attacking him later.

Thomas I didn't think of that.

James What ammunition?

Judas That he said some part of the law of Moses was not absolute. And that he seemed to suggest it was written only by Moses and not by God!

Joanna If that law was written by God, then he's no God I want to follow!

Thomas That's what's puzzling me. The rabbi also criticized the law, in words very close to the ones you might have used. Moses only made that law because of the "hardness of their hearts." And if divorce isn't allowed to either the husband or the wife, then doesn't that eliminate the unfairness you were telling me about last night?

- Joanna** But he went in the wrong direction! *[to Jesus]* Rabbi, you just got it wrong. I'm sorry, but you did! Men still hold all the power, and women and children are still chattel. You've taken one tool of abuse away from the men, but you haven't come close to restoring any kind of balance. Forcing a man who's grown tired of his wife and kids to stay with them doesn't necessarily help them at all.
- Judas** *[thoughtfully]* Maybe the way to spin this -- when the Pharisees begin making their accusations -- is that the rabbi is looking ahead to a time when the power *will* be balance, and when people will be more grown up and will have the faculties and freedom to make good marriages. Maybe, in a sense, *all* of the Law was due to our hard hearts, but the day is coming when Spirit will rule all.
- Joanna** *[skeptically]* I can imagine a lot of harm coming from that kind of rationalizing, but if that's what he was thinking, I guess I can understand it a little better. *[to Jesus]* Was it? Is that what you had in mind? *[a long pause waiting for Jesus to reply]* Rabbi? Aren't you going to answer?

Scene 4

James , Jesus , Joanna , Peter

{Peter enters.}

- Peter** Rabbi? There's a bunch of parents at the door wanting you to bless their children.
- James** More? I can't believe this! I've been sending them away all day.
- Jesus** *[indignantly]* What? Who told you to treat them like that? Let them in! Let them come to me!
- {The children are let in and crowd around Jesus.}*
- Jesus** *[jovially to the children]* Bless you! Bless you! The kingdom of God belongs to all those who come to me like you do. *[to the crowd]* I tell you truly: anyone who will not receive the kingdom like these precious children will never enter it!
- Joanna** *[in a whisper to Jesus]* These "precious children" are among the ones hurt the most by our current marriage laws, and who would be hurt as well by your absolutism. Think of all the children with neglectful or even abusive fathers. Do you think you're doing them a favor by forcing their parents to remain married? I'm glad you dismissed the law of Moses earlier, but what about the law of mercy?

Jesus

[in a low voice to Joanna] Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman is committing adultery. And if the wife marries another man, she's committing adultery. That is the true law.

You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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