

What Is So Difficult About Relationships? *Mark 10:2-16* | 10/7/2018

Quiz time. Today's question: What is the longest word in the English language?

No, it is not *antidisestablishmentarianism*. At 28 letters, that's a mouthful. It's not exactly a word used in everyday conversation, but it's in the dictionary and would make a killer point-getter in Scrabble.

But is that really the longest word? Not really. There are chemical names that are a lot longer than that, including names of proteins that have more than a thousand letters and place names like the 85-letter name of a hill. Most word nerds, however, tend to only count words that show up in a major dictionary as candidates for the longest words. With that criteria in mind, the longest word in the English language is *pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis* -- a 45 letter word that describes a disease of the lungs, which would seem to be a bad thing if it takes that long to say. Some would discount this word from consideration because it is a "coined" (in this case, a transliteration of the Greek) rather than a "naturally occurring" term.

If you're only considering those "naturally occurring" terms, then the longest word in the dictionary is *pseudopseudohypoparathyroidism*, which is still a technical term for a disease and gets an asterisk because it only gets used in a medical specialist's office. Plus, it uses "pseudopseudo" as a prefix. Sure, you could be pseudo once, but twice?

So, if you throw out the technical and coined terms, there's one word that still stands as the longest in the dictionary: *Floccinaucinihilipilification* (*flok-suh-naw-suh-nahy-hil-uh-pil-uh-fi-key-shuhn*) which means "an estimation of something as worthless." It's 29 letters, one more than the usually assumed champ -- *antidisestablishmentarianism*. Point is that when it comes to big words, English has more than its fair share and most of them have to do with disease or opposition to something. Those large words would seem to conceal the meaning within by dazzling the hearer with their apparent erudition. Saying to someone, "You are a fine example of *floccinaucinihilipilification*" sounds a lot better, for example, than saying, "Dude, you're a slug." It's all in the delivery.

We humans are often guilty of failing to say what we mean, thus big words can allow us to actually say very little while speaking a lot. If that's true, however, then so is the converse idea -- that, sometimes, small words allow us to say a lot while speaking very little. Big words may sound impressive because they are hard to pronounce, but often it's the small words that are the hardest to say.

In this week's text, Jesus offers some hard words about relationships. While the text is ostensibly about divorce and the relationship between husband and wife, it's also about a shift in the language of relationships from the language of law to the language of love.

The text begins with geography: "the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan" (10:1). Why would he do that? Because context is everything. This was the region where Mark tells us at the beginning of his gospel that John the Baptist had operated during his ministry (1:5), and John's ministry echoes through this passage. In Mark 6 we read the story of how John the Baptist had died at the hands of King Herod Antipas. John was beheaded because he challenged the king's divorce and his remarriage to his brother Philip's wife Herodias.

Think of it as a kind of first-century soap opera: The king ditches his lawful wife, Phasaelis, and Herodias divorces Philip so that the two can be together. While this was legal according to Roman law, Jewish law was quite different, and John the Baptist called the king on it, saying, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife" (6:18). Herodias wanted John dead for calling attention to the sordid relationship and had to trick Herod into having the prophet beheaded. John makes a legal argument and the king's new wife comes up with a "legal" solution to bump him off; the king's oath being legally and socially binding and all that.

It's interesting, then, that when the Pharisees want to "test" Jesus, they do it with the vocabulary of the law court (10:2). "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" They're hoping that Jesus' answer will allow them to bring him up on charges of treason against the king where they could get him convicted and executed like John.

At first, Jesus sounds like a lawyer, answering the question with a question: "What did Moses command you?" (v. 3). Jesus knew the law as well as any of them did and he already knew the answer. Yes, it was technically legal in Jewish law for a man to divorce his wife by simply writing her a certificate of dismissal. Do the paperwork and it was done (v. 4).

But Jesus then shifts the nature of the language from the legalese of the court to the language of the Scriptures. Rather than the legal bonds his interlocutors are concerned about, Jesus *is only concerned about the bond of love*. Forget the law of Moses in this case, says Jesus, and look at what God intended from the beginning.

Going back to Genesis, Jesus outlines the intent of marriage in the first place. What were once two separate people now become "one flesh" -- one person joined together by God who designed them to fit together emotionally, physically and spiritually (vv. 7-9). The legal language of divorce is all about separation. The language of love is always about bonding.

Jesus seems to understand divorce as a failure to use the right vocabulary. And what is that vocabulary? Well, rather than a bunch of words that are longer than your arm, this vocabulary uses short words that carry a lot of meaning. Words like: I am sorry (three words, 8 letters). Please forgive me (three words, 15 letters). I love you (three words, 8 letters). These sometimes aren't any easier to say than floccinaucinihilipilification, but they mean so much more. When our relationships become strained, Jesus calls us not to turn to the legal dictionary but toward each other.

It's pretty clear from this text that Jesus is really anti-divorce. He understood that the kind of selfish individualism that characterized Herod's court is all too common in human relationships. With a divorce rate hovering around 50 percent, we are a culture becoming increasingly characterized by broken relationships.

All of this is not to say that there aren't times when separation is necessary, such as an abusive situation. Jesus is not implying here that divorce is forbidden under every circumstance. But what about those of us who are already divorced? Should we look for a legalistic way to avoid blame? Am I off the hook because my wife divorced me?

By no means! I hope and pray that much of what I learned from my first marriage helps to make me a better husband in my second marriage. Jesus does not want us beating ourselves up over our past failures. That's where forgiveness comes into play, including forgiving ourselves. But we should learn from our past history, especially from our mistakes. Otherwise, we may indeed be condemned to repeat them.

You may also have noticed that Mosaic law allowed a man to divorce his wife quite easily. But no such provision was made for the wife! In his answer here, as well as in the part about welcoming children that follows, Jesus is saying that women and children, who were not greatly valued in the world at that time, are of great value in the Kingdom of God. Relationships are to be treasured, not trashed.

God did not design us to have relationships that are examples of floccinaucinihilipilification, something that is worthless. We were designed to love and respect each other, treating one another like persons of great value. And that's the Good Word.

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