

Lectionary 27/Proper 22 (B)
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Text: Mark 10:2-16

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A friend of mine went through a divorce a few years ago. Her husband had been becoming more and more distant for some time, and finally he just disappeared altogether. It was a very difficult and painful experience. And one of the nasty little surprises in the middle of it all was finding that her church turned out to not be a place of mercy or compassion. Instead, her church turned on her, spouting judgment and condemnation. And one of the Bible passages that got thrown in her face was from our gospel reading for today: What God has joined together, let no one separate! On top of her own grief and shame and feelings of failure, her church just made it all worse.

It seems to me that our scripture readings for today offer a wonderful opportunity for reflecting on what Jesus really has to say to us, because the heart of his message is about God's gift, not judgment. The first thing to notice is that what Jesus has to say about divorce isn't a measured pronouncement, so we shouldn't imagine that this short passage says everything Jesus would want to say about the matter. Instead, some Pharisees had come—and they had come to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Now the thing is, of course it was. There was a provision in the law of Moses, in Deuteronomy 24. It laid out what a man had to do to divorce his wife—write a certificate of divorce and send her away. The law was heavily tilted in favor of men. Only the man could initiate a divorce; and the law only required that his wife "displease him" in some way. The only real debate was about how small an offense was necessary for the man to be displeased. So since the law already stated how a divorce was to be done, what do you suppose the Pharisees were digging for?

What I like about Jesus' answer is that he doesn't really answer their question. Instead, he throws the issue right back at them. In essence he says, "Why are you asking about what the law permits, and why aren't you concerned instead with what God desires?" Don't you know that finding a partner to share your life with is one of the most amazing gifts that God gives? God has made us with a need to belong to one another. Being alone in the world is not good. Instead, we need a safe place in life to love and be loved, to care and be cared for, so that we can be strong enough to meet the challenges that life brings to us.

And if only it were that simple! But it's not. There is something about us that warps and distorts the gifts God gives. It causes us to serve ourselves first, to look to our own desires and whims above the needs of others. It makes us do selfish, uncaring, thoughtless things that are destructive to the relationships that matter to us most, to our marriage or our life partnership. The Bible calls it sin. And Jesus says that divorce exists because of human sin. If the human race were perfect, there would be no need for divorce. But as it is, we are all far from perfect. Every single

one of us finds life impacted in some way by sin—our own or that of others. We find life made less than the good that God desires in some way because of sin.

The real question is, “What now?” What is to be done with sinners like us? The answer that comes out of the whole of Jesus’ life and teaching is simple—declare the forgiveness of God, and call us back to life with God, to return to the God who loves us and seek again the life God desires for us. When sin has caused pain and damage in our lives, whether there has been a divorce or any of the other myriad ways in which we can harm ourselves and harm the relationships that mean the most to us, the role of the church isn’t to pin a red letter on the sinner, but instead to declare God’s love and Jesus’ message of forgiveness, and seek to build a community where healing can take place, where Jesus’ way of service and generosity and humility and forgiveness can help us begin to rebuild our lives.

This summer the ELCA approved a wonderful document, a social statement on human sexuality, that offers some guidance on how to deal with marriage, sex, divorce, and all of the kinds of questions that come with trying to be God’s faithful people in a changing culture. At the heart of it is the conviction that we are a community shaped by God’s deep love for the world. So when we talk about sex and marriage and divorce, we do so with mercy and compassion. We’re not naïve about the power of sin to do damage and cause pain. But our hope is in the power of God’s love to heal us and make the human family whole.

The key to a Christian approach to every question about sex and marriage and relationships is this: God made us for love—to love God with our whole heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. That means that in every question about sex and relationships, we are directed to ask: What will serve the wellbeing of all? Sexual relationships are never something only private, or something we have a right to, or something to serve only our own personal pleasure. Instead, they are part of how, as God’s beloved creatures, we care for one another and delight in one another, and seek to help each other grow to become whole and mature people.

So sex can be a good thing, a wonderful thing—it’s a gift from God. And in order to be a source of joy and blessing that lasts, sexual relationships need life-long commitment. In order to make sexual relationships safe—and I don’t mean “safe sex,” but safe for our hearts and our spirits, so that our relationships build up both us and our partner—we need our relationships to be exclusive and public and accountable. Because sex is such a powerful thing, it needs the boundaries of trust and mutual life-long commitment, and the public promises that make us accountable to others. Just as our Genesis reading pictures the “two becoming one flesh,” sex is an important element in the sharing of life between two partners who have pledged their lives to each other. Between spouses—husband and wife, or same-gender life-partners—sex is a gift that helps to grow intimacy and love and tenderness. It can help make marriages durable, and help parents build strong and stable families, so that they can provide a safe and secure place for children to grow.

Of course, the most fragile part of this whole thing is our human promises. As the Apostle Paul says, we can know what the right thing is, we can even want to do the right thing, and still not do it. That's one of the reasons I appreciate how, as Mark tells the story of Jesus' ministry, after telling about how Jesus' enemies were testing him with this question about divorce, Mark goes on to tell about Jesus blessing the children—these little ones whose lives are characterized by weakness and vulnerability. Jesus says this is how we enter the reign of God—not in the correctness of our moral judgments or the uprightness of our moral conduct, or the fulfillment of our promises, but in the need we have for God's mercy and love.

Some of us are hoping some day to find a partner to share our lives with, and until then we have other friendships that are a source of strength and joy. Some of us have already been profoundly blessed by the gift of a partner to share our lives with; but not all of us. And some of us who have received such a gift have done at least fairly well in living up to the promises we've made of faithfulness and commitment; but not all of us. Some of us have been blessed to grow up in a family that was healthy and that cared for us well; but not all of us. But all of us are welcomed into Jesus' embrace, to receive his blessing, to receive his promise of forgiveness, to hear his call to turn again to the God who loves us, to seek again the life God desires for us. You are God's children. And this life you have now, this life you have with God—it is a gift. It is all a gift. Thanks be to God. Amen