

19th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 22B
Genesis 2:18-24
Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

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We have a tough scripture today, because there's nobody in this gathering who has not been touched in some way by divorce – either our own, or in our family, or people we care about. Whenever we discuss divorce at church, the personal stories just come pouring out. And even when it happened years ago, feelings can stay close to the surface – grief, loss, sadness, anger, a sense of failure, betrayal, abandonment, disappointment in yourself and others. It is difficult to hear Jesus' teaching as anything except a personal condemnation. But I ask you to bear with me, because God has good news for all of us, today and every day, and we will find that good news together.

In today's scripture, Jesus went to the painful heart of the matter. He pointed out what we already know – that divorce represents the death of a dream, God's dream for us in the Garden of Eden and our dream for ourselves too. The truth is, nobody plans on getting divorced. When we make our wedding vows, we dream of marriage being a place of trust and safety and growth that lasts a whole life long. But so many marriages are not like that at all. In the real world, we often fall short of the ideal.

Yet even in places of pain and loss, God gives us what we need to live. And even when human promises are broken, God's promises of love and hope hold firm.

A woman once told me she didn't dare return to the church where she grew up, because she felt such shame over her divorce. Her husband was violent and she truly had no choice but to leave him, for her safety and her children's, but she still felt guilty. She felt she would be judged by other people and by God.

Another friend of mine was in the process of divorcing when he went to talk with his pastor—who himself was divorced some years before. He poured out his feelings of failure and guilt, and finally the pastor replied: *“Divorce is a sign of human sin. But remember, we have a God who forgives.”* Those words meant everything to my friend. He still struggles to understand and accept his own responsibility for what happened in his marriage, and God's forgiveness gives him strength to move ahead. Today he says, *“Divorce is not what I wanted or hoped for my life. But this is the life I have. And I trust God enough to believe God can meet me in my life as it is, and God can love me right where I am. And God will pull me through somehow.”*

It's been said that divorce involves a thousand little goodbyes. Goodbyes to the life you dreamed of, and the life you once had... But one thing we do not ever have to say goodbye to is God's love. There are times we simply *cannot* keep our promises to each other, and even *should* not. But God does keep God's promises to us. God keeps God's promise to forgive, and to continue working powerfully in our lives for love and resurrection, for healing, to renew us in hope and faith and support us to begin again.

The truth is that when it comes to dealing with relationships -- any human relationship - we all fall short of where God would have us be. It isn't only marriage that gives us trouble. None of us are perfect parents either, or perfect children, or siblings, or friends. In every human relationship there are struggles and questions that lead us into grey areas of right and wrong and keep us wondering: What action would be most loving? What decision would be most wise?

Not one of us is perfect, and the good news is, *we don't have to be*. Scripture says that "*all have sinned and fall short of God's glory*" (Rom 3:23) – and yet we are justified, we are made right with God, by the grace of Christ that is a free gift. All have sinned, yet we are all made right by God's forgiving love that reaches out first to us, and claims us forever. God's outreaching love makes all of this life holy – so there is no experience, no relationship, no place where God is not.

This means that when we are making bold marriage promises of lifelong commitment, God is there. And when we divorce in disappointment, God is also there. When we relate in ways that are loving and strong and generous and wise, God is with us to encourage us. When we cause each other pain, hurting and being hurt, God is there to grieve with us, to forgive, and to lead us in a new path. And when we judge ourselves so much more harshly than God would ever judge us, our loving Lord is there to lift us up and show us our true worth as God's beloved children. Because we are always precious in God's sight, even when we are not precious in our own sight.

It's a messy thing, this enterprise of human love and human community. But of course it is at the very heart of who we are created to be. And Jesus reminds us that we are given to be God's gift to each other. And though our lives are far, far from paradise, God always calls us to be the most loving people and most loving community we can be in Christ's name.

A wonderful teacher says, "The community of Christ is not a community of the perfect and virtuous, of the strong, or the wealthy, or the powerful, or the independent. Rather, this is a community of the broken, of the vulnerable, of those at risk. It's a community of those who know their need and seek to be in relationship with each other because we

have learned that by being in honest and open relationship with each other, we are in relationship with God, the very one who created us for each other in the first place.

“This is what Christ’s church is about. It is a place for those who have been broken by life to experience God through the crucified Jesus. And Jesus meets us in our vulnerability... to open us up to the brokenness and need of those around us...

“Being broken isn’t something to be ashamed of. To be broken is, in fact, to be human. And to be human is to be *loved by God* and *drawn together into relationship* with all the children of earth that God loves.

“So when we gather together on Sundays, as we do today, we gather as people who are both broken and loved. We are hurting but also healing. We are lost, but we have also been found. We know our need, and we seek not simply to have our needs met – but we have realized that in helping meet the needs of others, our own needs are met in turn.” (www.davidlose.net, adapted, 9/28/2015) This is the beautiful community Christ has drawn all of us into.

Today, in this worship service of grace and hope, when we share a holy meal with Christ and one another, we ask again for God’s healing, in love and trust. Amen.