

Pentecost 20b, October 3, 2021

Mark 10:1-8

The bride is standing at the entrance to the church looking frazzled and very nervous.

The pastor, noticing her uneasiness, says to her:

“Don’t worry too much about how everything will turn out.

Just focus on the aisle in front of you.

Then, when get about halfway down,

look at the altar where you will say your vows.

Finally, when you are near the front, then you can look at him, your beloved.”

As she walks into the church to the music of the procession,

those closest to her can hear her say over and over again:

“Aisle; altar; him.” ‘I’ll alter him’.”

That’s a phrase and an attitude that is bound to create a problem

which, sooner or later, will need to be addressed.

And speaking of addressing problems,

there are Bible passages and assigned readings

that every preacher would love to skip over. . .

and this one on divorce is a perfect example,

especially because Jesus’ condemnation of divorce in Mark 10

is incredibly hard-nosed and unyielding. No divorce allowed. . .ever!

But before get too upset at what he is saying,

I think it might be useful for us to look at the context of the passage.

We can still be shocked by what he says, and disagree with him. . .

but at least we will know what he is doing and why.

And the first thing to realize is that the question the Pharisees are asking

is essentially a question about loopholes—namely,

“When it comes to marriage, what can we get away with?

In other words, they are trying to find out

if there is an acceptable time and an appropriate way

of being set free of the duties and obligations of marriage.

And in a way it is a question familiar to all of us. Like the Pharisees,

we don’t want to do anything really wrong. We just want to know exactly

how far we can push the boundary of what is right before crossing the line.

Indeed, it is because of our scrupulousness to live just inside the law that makes tax preparers and tax consultants so important to us.

To put it another way: What the pharisees want is to live their lives under God and with one another on the basis of negotiations or bargains that can be struck and deals that can be made.

Their intent is to reduce their relationships and obligations to God and to other people to manageable formulas and rules.

You see, they know that divorce is permitted according to the law of Moses. They also know that rabbis down through the ages disagreed about what constituted justifiable cause for divorce.

The Rabbi Hillel, who was pretty much of a softie at least as far as men were concerned, said that any displeasure caused by the woman was sufficient reason to end a marriage.

His contemporary, Shammai, more of a hardliner for men, stated that sexual infidelity was the only valid reason for divorce-- which just so happens to be the reason Matthew and Luke adopt in their versions of this story.

So, at least on the surface, the Pharisees are doing nothing more than asking Jesus--whom many call "Rabbi" or "Teacher"-- asking him for **his** ruling on the issue.

However, although Jesus recognizes the reality of divorce, he implies that merely having Biblical precedent on your side doesn't let anyone off the hook.

As a matter of fact, while the pharisees are interested in permission. . .in what is allowed. . .

Jesus is interested in intentions. . .and not ours, but God's.

And that is why he takes his interrogators back to Genesis. . . back to a time before Moses. . .back to Creation itself, where, he points out, that God created people to live in community—in relationships with others.

Human beings were never meant to be isolated, self-fulfilling egos, designed to stare at our own belly buttons, concerned only with our own wellbeing and focused selfishly and primarily on our creature comforts.

And so by referring to this ancient story, Jesus makes two points:

First, he notes that the marriage relationship has its roots in creation itself—  
that marriage is a gift of God meant to bring blessing and joy,  
companionship and comfort to those who enter it.

In contrast, divorce is not about creation and new beginnings  
but is about destruction and endings. . .and death—  
and those of you who have been through the death of a marriage  
whether your own or someone close to you--  
you know exactly what Jesus is talking about--  
know how painful and heartbreaking and guilt-inducing it is.

And that is also why those of you who are weighed down  
with the feelings of failure, disappointment and loss  
that come unbidden along with a divorce—  
why you need to know that God grieves, weeps over  
and ultimately forgives all the terrible damage  
that divorce brings to and upon everyone involved in it:  
spouses, children, grandparents, friends, even congregations.

And that is why God's intention is for married people  
and those in committed, long-term relationships  
to be faithful to each other and to stay together for life.

At the same time, however, Jesus doesn't limit his remarks  
to what we call the "institution" of marriage.

He also uses the metaphor of marriage as a symbol  
of the unity God wants to have with all people.

The marriage relationship then becomes a way of describing  
God's relationship with all humanity: A profoundly intimate relationship  
of love and trust, of fidelity and honesty.

And that is why Jesus is so annoyed with the Pharisees' question  
about whether there are acceptable ways of separating from their partners  
or putting away or putting to death this most personal of all relationships.  
He is trying to show them that the issue of divorce  
and the desire to shed our responsibilities for and to our spouses  
is exactly the same issue behind humanity's search  
to sever its relationship with God. . .  
and God is not interested in sanctioning divorce--  
not between two people nor between human beings and their God.

Look, Jesus says, from the very beginning, God created people male and female.

And that act of creation means at least two things:

First, it means that God's image includes  
both male and female qualities or characteristics.

And second, since God did the creating, males had nothing to do with it  
and therefore didn't and don't have control over it  
or over the one they are marrying.

Just as God breathed life into the first human being formed from the dust of the earth,  
so God now takes a part of that first creature and creates a second—

not an inferior or a lesser--but an equal. . .  
meaning that the two are inextricably linked.

Thus, in Jesus' way of looking at things,  
the order in which women and men are created and the methods used  
have nothing to do with rank or superiority or power  
but have everything to do with mutual responsibility to each other,  
mutual honour of each other, and mutual caring for each other.

In other words, human beings were originally one.

They were then divided into two; which is why they yearn to be reunited—  
to be made one flesh again. And that reunion—  
that shared intimacy of body, mind and spirit--  
that re-connection or re-attachment or re-remembering  
depends on and, indeed, requires fidelity--  
physical, emotional and spiritual faithfulness.

So, while divorce may have been permitted by Moses

and is permitted by our laws today,

Jesus is calling his followers to a higher standard of behaviour—

to practice attitudes and take actions based on the truth

that each partner in the marriage is a reflection

of God's very being. . . meaning that such relationships are holy. . .

and those in them are, like God's commitment to humanity,  
are bound to each other in a bond that is not to be broken.

At the same time, Jesus is saying that the relationship of marriage,

as wonderful and wondrous as it is or at least can be, is not end in itself. . .

but is a means to or a preparation for a deeper

and more meaningful relationship with the Divine.

Once upon a time, the Bible says, human beings and God  
 were joined or connected to each other in a kind of marriage--  
 a relationship of utter love and trust, joyfully and freely given.  
 Unfortunately, when sin intruded into that relationship  
 because of our desire to be independent of God--  
 the result of this new love affair with what  
 we thought was freedom and autonomy--  
 the result was actually an act of infidelity  
 which ended up in a kind of “Cosmic Divorce.”

And if we can picture God as a husband,  
 the rest of the Bible from Genesis chapter 4 onward  
 is the story of God’s never-ending attempt to seek and find  
 and be reunited with God’s beloved--  
 and the gospel--the good news—is how that reconciliation and reunion  
 was and is “personalized” in the person named Jesus of Nazareth--

the one whose life, death and resurrection shows us clearly  
 the lengths to which God will go to prove the depth and breadth  
 of the divine love for us and for all--  
 which is why we say that God is now and for always  
 to be known by the name “Emmanuel”: “God IS with us.”

Finally, let me add this somewhat-lengthy footnote before I close:

The reading today is not only about broken relationships  
 between husbands and wives, and wives and wives,  
 and husbands and husbands and partners and lovers.  
 Nor is it only about the heartache and disappointment and loss  
 and the need and promise of forgiveness that come hand-in-hand  
 with a divorce or the ending of an affair of the heart.

It is also about how all of our relationships. . .  
 with family, friends, church members, neighbours, even enemies--  
 how all human relationships have their beginnings in God  
 and how they are sustained by the grace of God.

In other words, the reading from Mark 10 is also about how all  
 who were and are perceived to be beyond the reach of God  
 and “outside” of that relationship of love and trust with God--  
 how they are brought near and brought “inside” by Jesus.

For me, that is what the latter portion of the text is all about which describes Jesus summoning, holding and blessing the children. As I have said before in different sermons, at the time of Jesus, children were pretty much at the bottom of the food chain when it came to importance and value. Indeed, as a general rule, men had very little contact with children, leaving them in the care of women until the children reached puberty.

So, until they could or would produce or contribute something worthwhile to the wellbeing of the family or to the betterment of the village, children were essentially worthless—that is, worth-less than slaves who at least did something to earn their keep.

Thus, by what he does and says here and elsewhere, Jesus not only gives children significance and value, but he implies, rather astonishingly, that all who are of low. . .or no. . .status-- women, the poor, lepers, tax collectors, public sinners, the blind, lame, deaf and any other outcasts-- that all of them are welcome and wanted in the reign of God.

And that, my friends, has some implications for us as individuals and as this household of faith known as Living Faith Lutheran Church. Because while it is important for the church to honour and praise the estate of marriage and to decry and minimize divorce and its attendant problems, it is of equal importance for us in our time to forgive, embrace and accept all who are on the margins and periphery of our society. . . all those our culture considers to be of little or no value and worth. . . those who, in Robert Capon's words, are: "The little, the last, the least, and the lost."

People like single parents, those on social assistance, refugees, substance abusers, mentally and physically disabled or ill, the homeless, GLBT persons, adulterers, and even, dare I say it, sex offenders. . . who are, in many ways, our modern-day lepers, unwanted anywhere and despised everywhere.

And we are to do that--to welcome, forgive, accept and love them-- because that is exactly what God has done. . .and still does. . .to us.

You see, for me, the church is, or at least can be one of the very few places  
 and communities left in our society where people of all shapes and sizes,  
 colours and ages, races, languages and ethnicities;  
 people from different social, economic and political backgrounds;  
 with different gender identifications, sexual preferences  
 and marital status—where all can and do meet together  
 and where we claim that, despite appearances and opinions to the contrary,  
 that we are one. . .and then demonstrate our unity by eating and drinking together.

And what that means, then, is that the holy meal we celebrate regularly—  
 that it is not merely liturgical—that is, a rite performed for over 2000 years;  
 and it is not merely theological—a means whereby God grants  
 forgiveness and freedom, strength and peace to all who share in it;  
 but that this meal is also, in its plainest sense, profoundly political—  
 that is, it has to do with the fundamental ways  
 in which human beings relate to one another, take care of one another,  
 and be responsible to and for one another.

And to take on that responsibility is a big-time commitment—  
 and is a commitment or vow we make to God and to one another  
 that requires faithfulness, trust, affection, compassion and care,  
 a lot of hard work and a strong dose of duty  
 as well as a necessary and healthy sense of humour.

And, by the way, all of those qualities and traits and characteristics  
 are hallmarks and trademarks of a good marriage, good relationships,  
 a good congregation, and a good and rich and abundant life.

Amen.

SDG