

Proper 22B: Mark 10:2-9
Church of the Good Shepherd
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What God Has Joined Together

Reading Jesus' words about divorce just now, it makes me wonder, Why didn't I plan to be out of town *this Sunday* instead of next Sunday? "What God has joined together, let no one separate." I cannot read these words without thinking about how difficult and painful they are for many people to hear. I think about the couples in difficult relationships who struggle to stay together for the sake of the kids. I think about the couples who go ahead and end their marriage because they feel they'd be better apart than if they lived together. I think of my own family and how divorce has impacted our family dynamics and of friends of mine whose weddings I attended who are today no longer together. I think of the number of church members I've known who have shared with me the pain and shame and grief they still bear on account of divorces they experienced decades ago. I think too of all the children of divorce of various ages, from traumatized young children to still-hurting adults. For this reason, preachers are tempted this morning to skip the whole issue and focus on the sweet anecdote about Jesus welcoming children. Focus on the little children, and stay out of trouble!

And really who can blame us? There's just no way we can talk about divorce and avoid its challenges, its heartache, for all involved. Preaching about it is like running through a field of thorns: one misstep and we just add to the hurting. But as painful as it may be, this is the lesson God has given us this day and so we must venture carefully into the thorny field, trusting that amid the briars we can find good news for a world that's broken and in pain.

What we likely find most troubling about Jesus' words is that they seem devoid of the grace and love Jesus usually exuded. I mean, Jesus' grace shined the brightest when he was faced with people caught in adultery, with a woman who was married five times and now living with another man, with prostitutes and tax collectors and...well, you get the picture. So it's a little hard to imagine a woman coming up to Jesus, explaining how her first husband abused her so she had to leave him, only to have Jesus look at this poor soul and say, "Sorry, you are living in a sin so long as you remain divorced and if you ever even think of marrying some other person—no matter how fine a man he may be—that'd just be doubling-down on your sin and you'll live in a perpetual state of adultery. Have a nice day." I just can't see Jesus saying that.

Yet that is what Jesus' words on divorce in today's reading are taken to mean—that marriage is indissoluble and divorce is always a sin. While it's clear that Jesus disapproves of divorce, I'm not convinced that Jesus is giving his final, definitive pronouncement on marriage and divorce here and there's no room for forgiveness or grace. Indeed, elsewhere in the New Testament, you'll find more nuanced teachings regarding divorce.

But concerning today's reading, consider for a moment what's going on in this passage, what question Jesus was responding to. Well, it wasn't some despairing divorcée coming to him, asking "Lord, might God have any grace for me?" No, Jesus wasn't responding to a hurting

person. He was responding to a bunch of experts in the Law who were trying to trip him up, to trap him in an interpretation of the Law.

The Pharisees began, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" They aren't *really* asking Jesus to tell them what God's Law says. They already know what the answer. When Jesus asks them what Moses commanded, they immediately cite Deuteronomy 24:1, which allows a husband who finds in his wife "something shameful about her," to dismiss her with a certificate of divorce. It is clear then that it is "lawful" for a man to divorce his wife. What the Pharisees wanted to know, though, was what Jesus thought constitutes just cause for divorce: what qualifies as "something shameful" according to Deuteronomy?

You see, there was at this time a sharp disagreement in Jewish circles as to when a divorce was permitted. One school of thought said that this unspecified "something" in Deuteronomy was limited to adultery only. This was however the minority view. More typical was the approach that interpreted "something shameful" broadly. In this view, anything from disobeying a husband's command to burning dinner, to even finding another woman prettier than one's wife was sufficient grounds for divorce. (Clearly, the interests of the husband were paramount, not the wife's.) By asking Jesus where he came down on this issue, the Pharisees were trying to peg him with one of these two parties, hoping maybe that Jesus would enflame one side or the other, who would then build a case against him.

But Jesus shows no interest in being drawn into that debate. That was a game he didn't want to play. It reminds me of the final scene in the movie *Clear and Present Danger* when the President of the United States urges Jack Ryan—the hyper-loyal and ethical CIA agent played by Harrison Ford—to engage in a cover-up of some recent illegal actions taken by the administration. The President explains that this is how it works in Washington, "It's the old Potomac two-step." To which Ryan replies, "Sorry, Mr. President. I don't dance."

Like Jack Ryan, Jesus looks at the Pharisees and says, "Sorry, boys, but I don't dance." He then cuts to the heart of the matter. He says essentially, if you're asking about the grounds for ending a marriage, then that just shows you don't understand what marriage is for. Just as you don't learn how to fly an airplane by following the instructions for making a crash landing, and you don't get to be successful in war if you train by the rules for beating a retreat, the exceptional measures necessary when a marriage fails are of no help when it comes to discovering the meaning and intention of marriage.

For that, Jesus says, we need to go back further than Deuteronomy, back to the beginning, to Genesis, to the creation of humanity, to when God creates the first human but can't find a suitable companion for him and so God takes a "rib", literally the side of the man, and forms a woman from it, making two persons from one. This explains not only the attraction men and women have towards each other, having originally been one whole person, but also how marriage recreates that unity, making man and woman "one flesh" again.

If marriage is what Jesus and Genesis say it is, then we understand better why failed marriages bring such pain to couples, extended families, and communities. It's because divorce, even when it appears to be the best among all available options, is a rending of "flesh," the tearing apart of

something that was whole. It's always a tragedy, it always does trauma, even if we don't acknowledge it. Jesus' words, "what God has joined together, let no one separate," harsh though they may seem, are a warning to any who would construe marriage as a contract of convenience, casually formed and casually broken. As those who have been divorced will tell you, the marital bond is not so easily severed; it does not just dissolve once the divorce decree is signed. It's something that endures—because that's what it was intended to do, to last a lifetime.

Now, this doesn't mean marriage is a "life-sentence." Rather this is what allows marriage to be what it was intended to be—a sanctuary, a safe place where a man and woman can grow in love without fear of the other leaving once their partner discovers they snore or they begin to sport a few more wrinkles than they did when they were first married. Marriage is intended to be a place where the bonds of mutual affection are nurtured, where self-centeredness is overcome and mutual service encouraged, and where children can be conceived and raised in a secure and nurturing environment. Marriages also serve society, increasing order and security by uniting not just two people but their families as well and encouraging men in particular to settle down and to invest in the future. This is not to say that every marriage achieves these aims perfectly or even very well. But they're all good things that marriage provides and encourages, and so it is worth the work.

What this means is that marriage is about more than the husband and wife and what they make it to be. It is more than a contract between two people to facilitate their shared self-interest. It is about more than happiness, more than romance, more than getting one's needs fulfilled, such that it can then be discarded when it no longer meets those "needs." Marriage is rather something beautiful that God created and that serves his purpose. And that purpose is the flourishing of persons and the preservation of human society.

In theology, marriage, and the family, is an "order of creation," an institution that God ordained as a means to preserve His fallen world from even greater chaos, injustice and suffering. In this view, marriage is a place where we are called to live out the gospel in service to others, specifically, our spouses. Through marriage, for instance, people can care for each other, support each other, and strengthen each other for the tasks of childrearing and caring for the creation of which we are a part. And as Christians—single or married, divorced or widowed—we are called to promote and foster healthy marriages, and in the case of divorce to extend compassion and facilitate healing, recognizing that all marriages fall short of the God's vision for the sacred union of two who become one.

Jesus' words in today's lesson then do not present us with the last word on divorce, nor even really much guidance regarding family life. Instead his words invite us to envision marriage and all relationships according to God's loving intentions rather than our own notions of socially acceptable behavior. Like the Pharisees, it is all too easy to become preoccupied with what is permitted or not permitted, and miss how our most intimate relations with one another are ways that God has given us to care for and serve each other. Indeed, in challenging our assumptions about marriage, Jesus' words help us to appreciate better how God's grace works in our relationships to preserve, sanctify, and beautify the fallen world. And that is indeed good news! Amen.