

Nineteenth Weekend After Pentecost (B/RCL): "Divorce: Law & Gospel"

Mark 10:2-16

October 5-6, 2024

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

There are many memorable moments in a wedding ceremony, some of which may make me tear up or smile, and others of which hold special weight, at least for me. At each ceremony, after the two people exchange vows and rings, I name them and say that they, "by their promises before God and in the presence of this assembly, have joined themselves to one another in marriage. What God has joined together let no one separate." Those words come directly from today's Gospel (Mark 10:9).

In a flash, as I say those words, I wonder what the couple will face in their lives together. I hope that no one will ever drive a wedge between them. We pray throughout the ceremony that God will give the newly married couple **grace** to honor their vows, love, forgive and support their spouse "till death do them part." In the wedding homily I almost always talk about how **romance** is the **easy** part of being in a relationship. Marriage, lifelong commitment, requires love to endure when things get tough. Marriage calls for faithfulness even and especially in the times when the beloved is a lot less than lovely.

This Gospel about marriage and children comes right after Jesus' second prediction of His Passion and death. He and the disciples are headed to Jerusalem, where He will suffer and die. He's spoken about the need to **die** to self so that we may **live** – and the **circle of family** is the place where many of us make the greatest gift of self over the course of our lifetimes. I won't say we make the most **sacrifices** for our family, though, because as someone has said, "It's only a sacrifice when you do something you don't want to."<sup>1</sup>

The divorce rate in the United States is quoted as being quite high, like about 50%. It has actually declined, though, since the 1980's, and I read a study 10 years ago that said if current trends continued, 2/3 of marriages would end up succeeding.<sup>2</sup> That would be very good news. Stable, life-giving marriages are a blessing to the couple, their children, and the community. On the other hand: divorce hurts. I know.

In St. Mark's Gospel the Pharisees are always gunning for Jesus. In today's Gospel, they're trying to trip Him up, get Him to antagonize the powers-that-be, discredit Him with His followers, by asking about – **divorce** – which was a hot-button issue among Jesus' fellow Jews. The Pharisees ask, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (Mark 10:2) because **a woman didn't have the option** of divorcing her husband except for a few rare circumstances.

Jesus answered a question with a question: "What did Moses command you?" (Mark 10:3) In other words, "What does the Law [with a capital L, given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai] say?" Referring to a passage in Deuteronomy (24:1-4) that talks about a man finding "some indecency" in his wife, they responded, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to dismiss her." (Mark 10:4) That divorce decree, which in Jesus' day required a lawyer and had to be filed with the Sanhedrin, the Temple Council, freed a woman to marry someone else. This was very important and an act of compassion, because a woman and children unhitched from a man were impoverished and **highly** vulnerable. (That is frequently **still** the case. If a woman suddenly falls below the poverty line, divorce is often the reason.)

The thing is: **then**, like **now**, different people interpreted Scripture differently. In Jesus' day there were two radically different schools of thought:

- The Shammai school said that **adultery** was the only form of "**indecency**" that would warrant a husband divorcing his wife.
- The Hillel school said a husband could have almost any reason under the sun for divorcing his wife. Here's a set of examples I found:  
*"...if the wife spoiled a dish of food [burned dinner!], if she spun in the streets, if she talked to a strange man, if she spoke disrespectfully of her husband's relations in his hearing, if she was a brawling woman (who was defined as a woman whose voice could be heard in the next house). Rabbi Akiba even went the length of saying that it meant if a man found a woman who was fairer [prettier!] in his eyes than his wife was."*<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, most Jewish men went with the more lenient understanding of the Law.

Jesus wasn't going to minimize the importance of marriage, trivialize the bond of love and commitment on which it was based, or undermine the foundation of the family by going with the easy answer. Instead, in St. Mark's Gospel, Jesus gave the toughest interpretation of all:

*"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." (Mark 10:11-12)*

In St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives the exception of "unchastity" (adultery – Matthew 19:9). In 1 Corinthians, St. Paul allows divorce when a Christian is married to a pagan (what might be called a "mixed marriage" – 1 Cor. 7:15).

Jesus lets us know in no uncertain terms that our heavenly Father's perfect plan for creation is that marriages endure, partners be faithful, and the family be grounded in trust, in love, in permanency. That is the most sacred situation for parents and children alike.

But the unholy reality is that we are sinners living in an imperfect world. It's obvious to me that it doesn't glorify God for anyone to stay in an abusive relationship or to maintain a marriage in which adults or children are being brutalized physically or verbally. Destructive behavior divorces a couple as surely as any judge ever could. What happens in court is sometimes the state simply recognizing what has already happened in the home.

Uncontrolled substance abuse, other addictions or profound and irreversible mental illness can render a spouse incapable of participating in the covenant relationship of marriage. The ending of any marriage is not optimal. But sometimes it is the lesser of two evils. Only the two people most intimately involved can be the true judge. So let's **not** judge, lest we **be** judged....

Our Lutheran Christian tradition holds marriage to be sacred. But we also acknowledge the reality of sin, the brokenness of creation, and our God's unending ability to forgive, to heal, to bestow new beginnings even in the wake of devastating endings. The Gospel-welcome that Lutherans give to those who have suffered divorce is one of the reasons I became Lutheran. The holy hospitality this church extends to those who know the pain of marriage-that-ends-in-divorce is a gift. The spiritual and material

support that this church offers men, women, children whose lives and home have been torn apart helps to re-ground them in community, to heal a terrible hurt, to bolster trust in the faithful God who knows our faults and failings and loves us anyway.

Luther said the Law, the commandments, have a couple of different functions. God gives them as a fence to protect us, if we obey them. God gives the commandments as a lens through which to see our sin, since we are unable to keep them as we should. Luther taught that the Law shows us our need of the Gospel: God's loving mercy in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who gave the greatest commandment of all the night before He died: "Love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12)

If you are married and rejoicing, give thanks! May our Lord strengthen you in love to fulfill the vows you made on your wedding day, recent or distant. If you are divorced and hurting, may God heal you. If you are widowed, may God soften your sorrow. If you are single, may our Lord's presence keep you company always. May God make our faith family a blessing to 100% of our members and families, in all circumstances, now and always. Amen

<sup>1</sup>Mary Jordan and Kevin Sullivan, *The Prison Angel: Mother Antonia's Journey from Beverly Hills to a Life of Service in a Mexican Jail* (NY: Penguin, 2005), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>Claire Cain Miller, "The Divorce Surge Is Over, but the Myth Lives On," *The New York Times* (online, Dec. 2, 2014).

<sup>3</sup>William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (Daily Study Bible Series, rev. edition), (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 239)

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham