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Genesis 2:18-24, Psalm 8, Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12, Mark 10:2-16

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I thought again this week about my former pastor and the sermon series he used to imagine, titled “Things I Wish Jesus Had Never Said.” Here’s another one for that list, from the writer of Mark.

Jesus’ condemnation of divorce, in these words we hear today, have seared the hearts of many Christians who are on the painful journey out of a marriage. Maybe some of you are in this room today because you, too, ran up against the rocks of this passage. It is a rare Lutheran church that does not shelter a former Catholic excluded from full communion because of divorce. And as this congregation is now studying how to live out our welcome to those who identify as LGBTQ, maybe you were also uneasy as you hear Jesus quoting Genesis in words that our own denomination, not so long ago, used as the basis for refusing to marry same-sex couples in the church.¹

Today we hear the scriptural basis for the Roman Catholic prohibition of divorce, found right here in Mark. So what are we to make of our own denomination’s acceptance of divorce?

And how do we hear Jesus’ words in our own time and place, where something like half of all marriages end in divorce?

Let’s start by understanding this story in its first-century setting.

At this point in the gospel of Mark, Jesus and the disciples have left Capernaum, home territory, and they have traveled across the Jordan, heading toward Jerusalem. A crowd gathers, and among those people are some Pharisees, who come with a question to test him. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

Any Jew would know the answer. Well of course divorce was lawful, as it was plainly written in scripture. Probably the Pharisees were testing him to

¹ In Aug 2009 ELCA assembly recognized gay marriage and allowed for ordination of clergy in same-sex relationships. See “Human Sexuality, Gift and Trust.” In 2015 the Marriage Equality Act legalized same-sex marriage in all states.

see which interpretation of scripture he would go with, and that was a test he was going to fail, either way. One group of respected rabbis said a man could divorce his wife only for adultery. Another group said a man could divorce his wife for any reason at all—a view based on good scriptural authority, for it is written in Deuteronomy (24:1-4), “Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of the house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife.”

By that time, Jesus was known as a law-breaker. He violated the purity laws, eating with outsiders and sinners, touching lepers, talking with women outside the boundaries of the law, defending his disciples when they ate without washing their hands. He even broke the commandments, healing on the Sabbath when God commands rest on that day.

But this time, Jesus surprises them—and maybe you too—by answering that the law wasn’t strict enough.

Well, yes, he says, divorce is legal but only because of your hard hearts. A husband could divorce a woman because she does not please him? Or because he finds something objectionable about her? By these standards, what woman here would still be married? Surely not I. Notice here too that there isn’t any public accountability for divorce—a husband just had to write, “I release and divorce my wife this day,” and she was out. Hard-hearted, indeed.

Cast out by their husbands, divorced women were left to depend on the charity of their communities or hope for the protection of a man who was willing to marry a woman rejected by another man.

In his sharp criticism of divorce, then, Jesus is speaking a word of judgment to a first-century society that took little account of women. In this teaching he rejects practices of divorce that shame and harm women who are dependent on men’s care and protection. It makes sense, then that this teaching is followed immediately by Jesus’ welcoming of children. In both parts of today’s gospel Jesus defends and claims those who are vulnerable.

In arguing that faithful living should go beyond the law, Jesus concludes with the words that we hear after marriage vows are exchanged at a wedding: “Those whom God has joined together, let no one separate.”

In the assembly that gathers to bear witness to a wedding, those words are likely heard in many different ways. For those who long for a lasting love they have not yet found, these words are bittersweet. For those in marriages that nourish and sustain, they are words heard with joy and thanksgiving. For those who are divorced, these words may fall like an accusation or a hammer of judgment. For those who are in marriages full of pain or dead at the heart, these words may sound like a life sentence.

As Luther wrote with his characteristic directness, “...when marriage turns out badly, it is hell.” Some of you have been there, and for some, divorce is the way out of hell—a door to the new life promised by Christ himself, who declared, I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

A Presbyterian minister, divorced himself, offers these healing words on divorce.

He writes, “Any marriage is full of broken promises, most of them nonfatal, forgivable, even laughable. When I have to come face to face with breaking the supposedly ‘unbreakable’ vow of marriage, it may be that I confront my own weakness, sinfulness, or mistakenness, but I want to say that I do not in that moment confront a total judgment on my worth as a marriage partner, still less as a total person. I find myself instead at a way station on the journey, one full of misery and recrimination, much of it self-inflicted, some of thrown in by family , friends, the church, or society. . . . “

He goes on, “One of the really staggering and hurtful misconceptions about divorce is the assumption we commonly and unknowingly make that somehow this striving and venture, unlike any other in the human circus, is denied room for failure.”²

We do not love as God loves. Never married, long married, or married more than once...we’re all in need of God’s mercy and healing.

² J. Randall Nichols, *Ending Marriage, Keeping Faith: A New Guide Through the Spirituality of Divorce*, 1991, pp. 57, 104.

Thanks be to the One whose love never ends.

Thanks be to God.