



Sunday's Sermon

Pastor Lara Forbes



Growing Together in Christ to Love and Serve All People

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

October 3, 2021

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Mark 10:2-16

Grace and peace to you from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week, I mentioned that in the coming weeks, the teachings and words of Jesus would get tougher and more difficult to hear. Today's gospel reading is an example of that. Divorce is a painful subject for everyone because we've each been affected by it in some way.

But we aren't going to ignore Jesus' words here, so - in all seriousness - my sermon today comes with a trigger warning. It will address what Jesus says because this is one of those readings that's often used against people and causes harm.

But my sermon will also affirm what God's desires are for us with regard to our relationships - relationships of marriage and otherwise, and it will also talk about grace. Because there's always grace.

Because of their interactions, we know that one of the Pharisees' goals was to trap Jesus; it's why they were always asking him tricky questions about the law. The Pharisees were all about honoring God's law and, to them, it looked like Jesus was trying to overthrow it.

And his popularity was a threat to the authority and power that they had, and if they could discredit him, it boosted their credibility with the people. So in this particular conversation they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

¹One of the things for us to remember is that divorce in the first century was a generally accepted part of life among the Jews and within the wider Greco-Roman Culture. Some leaders spoke against it because they thought it was bad for society, but for the most part people debated only the details of its legal basis.

²Divorce presumes marriage, and that's how Jesus answers the question. But marriage in the first century wasn't a result of courtship and romance; it was an arrangement between families, and it was about property and money and honor and status. So divorce was as complicated then as it is today, but for different reasons.

1 <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-27-2/commentary-on-mark-102-16-2>

2 <https://apearldownunder.blogspot.com/2021/10/the-question-of-divorce.html>

³But the other thing about divorce in the first century is that it left women in a precarious place. When a man divorced his wife, if her father or brother was unwilling to take her in, the consequences for the woman were devastating because she had no legal or social standing.

She was left to fend for herself in a society that considered her to be a piece of property. So Jesus' words here were likely intended to protect women who were much more vulnerable before the law than men were.

But for Jesus, it wasn't enough that a contract was honored and the woman was legally protected; he was also interested in making sure she was genuinely cared for. Because at the heart of all of this is relationship. Because for Jesus, the relationship between people is always more important than honoring a contract or economic obligations.

That's what the Pharisees had lost sight of. They were caught up in the legal implications of marriage and divorce, instead of remembering the hearts of the people involved. And more often than not, that's what they and Jesus butted heads over. Because for Jesus, people are always more important, and God's law was given to protect people.

So even if a marriage ended in divorce, Jesus' concern was for the people - especially for the ones who were more vulnerable in that type of situation.

⁴Even though this particular teaching of Jesus speaks about marriage, it offers us a broader vision that speaks to *all* human relationships - to the ways in which we see, treat, protect, harm, empower, and disempower each other - all aspects of our interactions with one another.

Because being in relationship is what it means to be human - relationships are the foundation of human community. God rooted that in our identity at creation. It's part of how God created us, and what God desires for us is to be in relationships that are healthy and life-giving and nurturing. And it's our own hardness of heart as humans that gets in the way of that.

So when relationships like a marriage fail, it doesn't mean they're sinful and that one or both of the people in the couple should be cast out. It means people are people. And that sometimes, despite our best efforts to love each other, we end up hurting each other instead. And our relationships bear the cost of that.

And in some cases, the relationship can be mended. But sometimes it can't - and sometimes it shouldn't be. If you are in a relationship, one of marriage or otherwise, and it's harmful *to* you or *for* you, it's okay for it to end.

Regardless of the reason a relationship ends, though, *when* it does there is grace. There is always grace. And understanding. And compassion for the people involved.

Because what Jesus affirms is that God's dream for us, is that we recognize the people we encounter are each essential, vulnerable, and as worthy of tenderness and protection as we ourselves are. That we recognize they bear God's divine image in their being, and that we love and care for one another on that basis alone. Those are the kinds of relationships God wants for us and wants us to seek to have with one another.

That isn't to say that it's easy. We all know that relationships take work. The boundaries we set around them are important, and promises we make within them aren't made to be taken lightly.

But as we seek these life-giving types of relationships, we come to understand that they reflect our relationship with God. ⁵And we recognize that in them, God is saying, "In Jesus, I am here in relationship with you. Nothing can separate us. No matter what happens, I am here."

3 <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/love-and-marriage>

4 <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1960-bone-of-my-bones>

5 <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-27-2/commentary-on-mark-102-16>

When we get in our own way, that's what gets us through.

⁶As people of faith, we know that our relationship with God is for all time. It's the foundation for the relationships we have with other people because it helps us learn how to care for each other well, and to protect each other. And as we do that, we learn what it means to experience Divine love.

Because to be in relationship - whether it's a relationship of marriage or otherwise - is what it means to be human. God put that in our identity at creation. And it affirms for us that God desires for us to be in relationships that are healthy and life-giving; that help us recognize God in one another, and the love God has for each of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

6 <https://www.disruptworshipproject.com/created-in-and-for-relationship/>