

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

October 3, 2021 (Proper 22, Year B)
Mark 10:2-16
Genesis 2:18-24

A farmer walked into an attorney's office to file for a divorce.
The attorney asked, "May I help you?"
The farmer said, "Yeah, I want to get one of them dayvorses."
The attorney said, "Well, do you have any grounds?"
The farmer said, "Yeah, I got about 140 acres."
The attorney said, "No, you don't understand; do you have a case?"
The farmer said, "No, I don't have a Case, but I have a John Deere."
The attorney said, "No, you don't understand. I mean do you have a grudge?"
The farmer said, "Yeah, I've got a grudge. That's where I park my John Deere."
The attorney said, "No, sir, I mean do you have a suit?"
The farmer said, "Yes, sir, I got a suit. I wear it to church on Sundays."
The exasperated attorney said, "Well, sir, does your wife beat you up or anything?"
The farmer said, "No, sir, we both get up about 4:30."
Finally, the attorney said, "Okay, let me put it this way. Why do you want a divorce?"
The farmer replied, "Well, I can never have a meaningful conversation with her!"

But seriously though, we often joke about things because they make us uncomfortable. And this is one of those subjects.

From what I have read on pastor message boards, a lot of pastors are AVOIDING the Gospel today, preaching on something ELSE completely. I wish I could do that. I would LOVE to skip right OVER this divorce stuff, to the END of this Gospel reading, to the NICE image of Jesus with the children.

But that wouldn't be fair. There are TOO many here among us today that have been AFFECTED by divorce in some way, whether it was their own divorce, or the divorce of a friend, or the divorce of a family member. I don't know many people who HAVEN'T been AFFECTED by a divorce. So, as uncomfortable a subject as it is, we NEED to talk about it.

I heard of one young woman who told her youth leader that she HATES false eye-lashes. It seemed a rather STRONG opinion about something so specific and simple, so the youth leader asked her why. She said that her MOM started to WEAR them when her parent's relationship started to fall apart. And that was the MOMENT when their daughter could SEE that she was withdrawing from her family, when she started looking at OTHER men. And so, this teenager hates false eye-lashes.

Have you ever heard it said that "50% of all marriages end in divorce?" Well, the result of that has become painfully clear. The children of all those divorces are simply choosing NOT to get married. We pastors don't do that MANY weddings any more. Young people are thinking that marriage vows don't MEAN anything anyway, so why go to trouble?

I recently read about a research study by the University of Maryland about those who DO marry. It said that overall divorce rates actually dropped by 8% from 2008 to 2016, driven primarily by a declining divorce rate among millennials. They now make up the largest block of our population, and since they are driving the AVERAGE rate down, that means that THEIR divorce rate is even lower. I saw a headline that read, "Millennials are SAVING marriage." But it doesn't take MUCH reflection to figure out what's BEHIND their LOWER divorce rate: their PARENTS had the HIGHEST

divorce rate in HISTORY. This younger generation has learned by their OWN PAIN to take divorce seriously.

The Pharisees ask Jesus a QUESTION about divorce, but he DOESN'T answer it. They ask, "Is it lawful?" but Jesus doesn't answer, because it's the WRONG question. You see, in Jesus' day, Jewish law ALLOWED a man, and ONLY a man, to get a divorce, and it was ALL VERY SIMPLE. All the husband had to do was draft a certificate of divorce. That meant writing on a piece of paper: "She is not my wife and I am not her husband." He just gave her the paper and kicked her out of the house. And they were divorced.

It was TOO easy. In that system, wives were only considered property, so divorce gave husbands a way to just throw their wives away. That's WHY Jesus condemns REMARRIAGE here, because men were divorcing their wives IN ORDER to marry someone else. And DISCARD their current wives. They didn't take divorce SERIOUSLY.

But Jesus doesn't answer the Pharisees question, because it's the WRONG question. They ask what is lawful, but the question Jesus ANSWERS is what God INTENDS for marriage.

As someone once said, you don't learn to fly a plane by studying the manual for a crash landing. Jesus is MUCH more interested in a smooth flight.

What God INTENDS (for ALL people, not just those who MARRY) is love and wholeness. God's intentions were revealed back at the beginning of creation. Remember that story we read from Genesis. The point is that ALL people, men AND women, are MADE for CONNECTION with another person. God said, "It is NOT GOOD to be ALONE." Sometimes that means marriage, sometimes that means community, but it ALWAYS means CONNECTION.

We were originally created to be one, and we long for that kind of unity again. In marriage, there's some truth to those sayings about finding your mate being like finding your other half, or calling your spouse your "better half." There's a REASON losing your spouse feels like losing a part of yourself.

Marriage joins two people together. The two become one. For Jesus, it isn't a legal matter, it's part of God's WILL for creation. Marriage is a HOLY thing.

But there's a HUGE, HUGE difference between GOD'S intentions and HUMAN realities. Jesus said, "Because of your HARDNESS of HEART he wrote this commandment for you." I think Jesus probably said those words with sadness in his voice. Divorce WASN'T what God WANTED, and it CERTAINLY wasn't what God INTENDED.

But SOMETIMES divorce is NECESSARY. When the two are BROKEN and NO LONGER one, when their relationship DOESN'T bring wholeness, but ONLY causes each other pain, when reconciliation is BEYOND impossible, in those situations, staying TOGETHER CAN'T be what God intends EITHER. In fact, if one is ABUSING the other, in THOSE cases, divorce may be the BEST decision.

But EVEN THEN, even when it's NECESSARY, it's still PAINFUL. To break apart what God has joined together HURTS DEEPLY. We lose a PART of ourselves. And THEN, PILING ON, there's the embarrassment of parents and family members, the judging eyes of others, the awkwardness of old MUTUAL friendships, the PAIN of shattered dreams, the confusion and hurt of the children. OH, the CHILDREN! It TEARS them APART. And it leaves deep, painful wounds.

So, let's be real. As much as we don't want to hear it, as much as it STINGS, we have to ADMIT what we already KNOW from our own experience – that anything that causes this MUCH PAIN and damage CAN'T be God's will. It's the product of OUR brokenness.

That's what the Pharisees missed. It's not just a legal thing; it's a SPIRITUAL thing.

BUT ... as DIFFICULT as divorce is for us, and as PAINFUL as it must be for GOD too, I need you to understand something. This ISN'T Jesus' last word.

Did you notice that there are TWO stories here in this reading, and that's NOT an accident. The second story, about the CHILDREN – it SAYS something about the FIRST story. He says, "Let the children come to me."

You see, when the world falls apart around us, pain and brokenness are NEVER the LAST word. JESUS is the last word, and HERE that last word IS: “Let them come to me.”

God created us to share love and wholeness, but even when that CRUMBLES, GOD IS THERE. God STILL wants us to be whole, and God STILL wants us to know love. So AS our wounds heal, Jesus is THERE for us, as a friend, as a comforter, as a lover. And perhaps most importantly, he’s there for us as a HEALER. WHOLENESS WILL come again. Sometimes that means a NEW love and a NEW marriage, and sometimes it JUST means a new LIFE, but it ALWAYS means CONNECTION. “Let them come to me.”

The Pharisees had it all wrong. Receiving the Kingdom of God isn’t about winning arguments. Receiving the Kingdom of God is about the LOVING, VULNERABLE, UNCOMPLICATED FAITH of a child. We are the children of GOD, and LIKE children, we ALL come before God with NOTHING, as SINNERS. But even when we find it HARD to love, even to love OURSELVES, the God of CREATION is ALSO the God of FORGIVENESS, and the God of peace, and the God of love.

And that’s why God gathers us together in community, because God STILL HOLDS that vision of creation, when God said, “It is not good to be alone.” We ALL come to God as HELPLESS children, and Jesus says, “Let them come to me.”

And for each of YOU, HOWEVER WOUNDED you are, he lifts YOU up, and HOLDS you, and LOVES you. Because you are HIS child, and God IS LOVE. Amen.