

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 4, 2015
Pentecost 19
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 2:18-24
Psalm 128
Hebrews 2:1-8
Mark 10:1-9

My personal preference today would have been to preach the epistle text from Hebrews. But alas, the Gospel text became the “squeaky wheel that needed to be greased.”

On the surface, the text seems to address the issue of divorce, a subject as controversial in Jesus’ day as it is in our own. Before we look at it, permit me a disclaimer.

It should be noted from the outset that no individual sermon can be the *last* or *definitive* word on this subject. We cannot consult this morning the other passages or relevant texts that might shed light on this issue. We have before us this morning only this text from Mark. We shall grapple with it as best we can, and pray that when the dust settles, we will be standing on grace-filled ground.

For starters, this text is not actually a conversation or debate about marriage and divorce. This text is about the Mosaic Law, the Law given *to* and *through* Moses. Jesus’ questioners here knew full well that the Law given through Moses allowed for divorce. The specific part of the Law on their minds is Deuteronomy

24, where Moses writes that when a man takes a wife and she finds no favor in his eyes, he can write her a bill of divorce and put her out of his house. So, for Jesus' questioners, the possibility of divorce was not the issue. The issue was: *under what circumstances was divorce allowed?*

Two schools of thought had arisen among the rabbis and religious teachers. The more liberal school taught that divorce was allowed for any reason. The more conservative school taught that a man could divorce his wife *only* if she had been unfaithful.

We should remember that the ancient world was a very different world from today. In that world, women were treated as the property of their husbands, not as equals. In Roman society, a woman could divorce her husband, but in the Jewish world only the man could initiate a divorce.

In this ancient world, marriages were not based on love between two persons, but on property and status considerations between two families. It's hard for us to conceive of this, but in the ancient world marriage was primarily a legal contract concerned with the exchange of property.

In such a system, guess who ended up being vulnerable and dependent? If a man could simply write a certificate of divorce and hand it to his wife, what were the consequences? For the woman, the consequences were severe. There was disgrace from both her family and society. There was almost certain economic

hardship. And the prospects for her and her children would now be severely limited.

This, then, is the context for this confrontation between the Pharisees and Jesus. They ask him: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

Jesus’ response is intriguing. Jesus refuses to render a legal judgment on divorce, but instead turns their question on its head. He shifts the conversation from *legal* categories to *relational* categories. He takes the Deuteronomy text and reinterprets it in light of Genesis 2. In a culture where marriage was seen as a legal contract, *Jesus reclaims it as more than just a legal obligation.*

From Genesis, Jesus argues that questions of marriage and divorce aren’t simply a matter of legal niceties, but are about the Creator’s intention that we be in relationships of mutual dependence and health. The Pharisees had turned God’s Law into a *legal convenience* (especially regarding divorce). But Jesus reminds them that God’s Law exists to protect the *vulnerable*. When a woman was divorced she lost pretty much everything – status, reputation, economic security, everything – so how, Jesus asks, can you treat this subject as a convenience or (worse) a debating topic?

In fact, says Jesus, Moses wrote those words in Deuteronomy as a concession to your hard-hearted sinfulness. *The Mosaic provision was meant to curb a problem, not license a practice that goes against God’s original intentions*

for marriage. In God's original intent, a man and a woman enter into a common human life and social relationship because they are created as equals.

Jesus' words here, then, are likely intended not to set up a standard by which to judge and stigmatize, but rather to protect women who were much more vulnerable before the Law than men.

From this text at least, I believe that Jesus wanted to assure both men and women that God blesses our marriages and wills for them to flourish, and that any time a marriage ends in ruin it grieves the heart of God, *not because some legal standard has been broken*, but because of the damage done to God's beloved children.

I realize that much has been left unsaid here. I know, for example, that Jesus seems to speak in these passages (and others) only about believing persons whom God has joined together. He says nothing about pagan marriages, nor does he suggest that God joins all marriages together.

I realize that we have not explored Matthew's version of this incident in Mark, and the implications it might have for us. In Matthew, Jesus appears to provide an exception to the "no divorce" rule, whereas here in Mark the discussion seems to be about the legitimacy of divorce itself.

But from this text here in Mark, the one thing we can safely say is this:
Jesus' forbidding of divorce here seems to be a clear statement about the status of

women in his society. *Given the nature of this society, easy divorce of women, especially when children are involved, is tantamount to abrogating responsibility for caring for the most important members of society at a time when they are most vulnerable.*

Jesus says a resounding “no” to this. The community that forms around him and his teachings, says Jesus, will be an *alternative* kind of community.

I understand that our world today is a much different world than the one to which Jesus spoke these words. And yet in many ways the two worlds are the same. We seek and hunger for meaningful relationships – relationships with God and with one another. We seek and hunger for relationships of respect and reciprocity. And we all know and experience the pain that results when relationships disintegrate and break down.

Into these realities let us continue to ask ourselves this question: What kind of faith community do we want to be? What kind of community does Jesus call us to be?

As we ponder that question, I believe that we can only become the community Christ wants us to be as we are nurtured by his grace. So come to his Table today hungry for that grace to fill us and guide us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.