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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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St. Mark 10:2-16

In this episode of St. Mark the Pharisees come to Jesus with another trick question about the Law of Moses.

“Does our Law allow a man to divorce his wife?”

Palestinian Jewish society was a male society. A man had a right to divorce his wife, not the other way around.

Nonetheless, there were disputes among the Pharisees over how far this right went. Some taught that a man could divorce if his wife burned breakfast. Others taught that it was a limited right, properly restricted to serious grounds only, say, due to adultery?

So part of their reason in asking it is to pin Jesus down: Which side of the argument is he on?

They are asking a question of legality, not morality. Sometimes as we know, “legal” is very different from “ethical” or “moral.”

They already knew the legal answer to their question, but Jesus makes them say it anyway.

“What does Moses say in the Law?”

And they answer - legally - as they must: “Moses gave permission for a man to write a divorce notice and send his wife away.”

They asked a legal question and Jesus made them recite the answer. I love it when he does that.

But that was the Law of Moses, decreed from the perspective of the male, and we must assume some men took advantage of it to the disadvantage of women.

What Jesus does next is what he does so well and so often. He takes the question of legality, flips it, and turns it into one of moral ethics. After the Pharisees give their legal reply, Jesus asserts: “Moses gave you this law because you are hard to teach.”

I'm guessing, had men been easier to teach, the Law of Moses might have said something different.

It was God's intention from the beginning of creation, says Jesus, that both man and woman have mutual obligations and duties toward each other. It was because of this, as "male and female" that God made husband and wife to become one flesh. Because it was God's act, no one may separate what God joins.

In a few short sentences here is what Jesus has done.

Jesus addresses the question of legality — yes, divorce is legal. But that's because Moses knew men are stupid.

Yet while legal it is not moral because it places one (the female) at the disadvantage of the other (the male).

By forbidding divorce, Jesus establishes the right of a woman to live without fear of being divorced for no reason. He established her right to a secure marriage.

Jesus acknowledges the behavior permitted by the Law of Moses, and then he challenges everyone to a deeper standard of behavior.

For those days, maybe these days too, what he said about marriage and divorce was ground-breaking.

Marriage is part of what we Lutherans call the "Created Order," the way things are supposed to be, but sometimes aren't.

To call marriage part of the natural created order is to say that marriage is intended for all of humanity, for everyone. It is intended as a blessing for the whole world.

God made creation in such way that it could be this way for everyone.

God intended that woman should marry man. God intended man should marry woman. God intended that they should have children to nurture and love within a family for all their days on earth.

Marriage then is a blessing of God for all people of all religions, regions, races and cultures.

Marriage fulfills one of the purposes of creation. Man and woman become co-creators with God, renewing and replenishing humanity. It is a gift of God has given to the whole human family on earth; a means of grace for the whole world through the formation of family and community.

But we are hard to teach. And God doesn't get everything he wants. Sin, that age-old adversary, to paraphrase the Lutheran Book of Worship, can rob marriage of its joy and its intended purpose. Our sin conspires against the will of God. Marriage can become a nightmare of anger and recrimination, of emptiness and despair.

Next to the death of a spouse, divorce from a spouse is the single most painful event an individual can experience. I do not know anyone divorced who does not regard it as perhaps the greatest personal failure of their life. This is not what God intended. But - against God's will - it happens.

We do not live in a pure world. It is world shrouded by a blanket of trouble, a world fallen into disrepair. Despite our best efforts, despite however much we might wish things were otherwise, we make mistakes, we cause hurt, and we inflict pain. We are hard to teach.

There may be conditions where divorce by simple practicality is the best choice among terrible choices. Where marriage is filled with strife, violence, infidelity, hatred, contempt, it is no marriage. Where it is marred by indifference, where there is no mutuality, it is no marriage; it takes two to have a marriage.

And after all the considerations have been taken into account, the potential cost added up against slim benefits, and one nonetheless decides for divorce, is that still sin?

Yes. It is sin.

We do not, any of us, live guiltless in this world. There is no one of us who lives a life untouched by our own sin.

And we must take Jesus at his word.

Divorce is sin.

It may be legal, but it remains a sin.

What do you think of when you hear the word "sin?" I believe most people think of some taking a deliberate action opposite to what is right. By deliberate I mean we look at the line God has drawn in the sand. God says, "Thou shalt not cross that line." And we say, "The hell I won't; you just watch me."

So we think of sin as deliberate, willful disobedience.

But mostly I think it is something else. We all know the ordinary pulses of good and evil, of what is right and what is wrong, and we wish for the good.

The Hebrew root word for “sin” is “miss.” It evokes the image of an archer carefully aiming at the target, aiming as tightly as possible; an archer aching to strike the target center, loosening the arrow, and missing by a mile.

“I don’t understand. That should have been an easy shot. How did I miss?”

This is the real nature of sin as we confront it. Like the song says, “don’t know a soul that’s not be battered; don’t have a friend who feels at ease.”

And a failed marriage, sin, is that battering uneasiness because we can’t hit the target.

And the Church through the centuries has been very swift to say so. There isn’t anyone divorced who hasn’t heard that part of the message, and often heard it in great pain, bewilderment, self-recrimination, and anger.

But what the Church has also said — though never nearly loudly enough — is also clear.

It is this:

In Christ is forgiveness of sin.

I will say it again.

There is forgiveness of sin in Christ.

Now, if I were a pastor with guts here is how I would have begun this sermon, this morning, this way.

I would have asked:

— Everyone who is divorced, please stand up.

— Everyone who has considered divorce, please stand up.

— Everyone whose parent, child, brother or sister ever divorced, please stand up.

— Everyone who once committed adultery or even thought of it, please stand up.

— Everyone who hit or wanted to hit your spouse, please stand up.

— Everyone who ever spoke words that cut the spirit of your spouse, please stand up.

— Everyone who ever turned away from a spouse whose heart was breaking, would you please stand up.

By then, no adult would be left sitting in the pew. We would all be standing.

And then – with everyone still standing - I would have said:

Do you see how broken we are, each of us?

See how we should not make quick judgments against each other, not even an ex-spouse, for we each are broken and in bondage to sin?

See how much we need Christ to mend the rips in our soul?

Do you see why God must come near to us?

Do you see why we need God near us?

Do you see why we can approach Jesus only with empty hands, as empty as little children, only as children trusting in God's goodness, only as people who have made themselves children entering the Kingdom?

Do you see why every Sunday at this Table we receive the heart of Christ for the healing of our own?

Well, that's what I would have said, if I was a pastor with guts.

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