

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (b)
Genesis 2:18-25 Hebrews 2:1-13 Mark 10:2-16
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
October 3, 2021 [Traditional]

Well, here's a gospel lesson that almost always hits a sore spot. Jesus' teaching on divorce has a way of closing people's ears. I would guess that every person here has either had a divorce in their family or has been through a divorce. We've been doubled over by the pain and heartbreak that leads up to it, and we know the complicated family dynamics it often leaves in its wake.

And here we have Jesus, offering us no compromise. This is one of those times where we know that this man definitely ain't from around here. He's coming from a different world. He's telling us that as far as God's original intention goes, *divorce is not to be*. It is not to happen. So here you and I are, trying to find ways to cope and heal from the reality of our broken-ness, pain, separation, heartbreak in our lives, and Jesus is basically telling us, "well, you shouldn't have been broken in the first place." If we take it that way, it's no wonder we close our ears. It can feel like Jesus is rubbing salt into our wounds, it's not helpful.

But let's open our ears. Because if you're wounded, if you're going through the pain of separation or divorce, if your family life is hurting...if you're feeling guilty or someone has hurt you...you've come to the healing waters today. You're in the right place, here with your fellow broken Christians. Open your ears to the good news of healing and forgiveness that comes with your crucified savior, Jesus Christ. You and I, who are hurting, who are going through troubles...we are the ones whom Jesus came to heal. There's good news in this lesson for us.

First of all: a little context. The pharisees come to test Jesus. They want to trap him; they're always trying to get him to take sides. You see, there was a debate going on among the rabbis back then about divorce. When was it permissible, and when was it not? Some were more strict about it. They thought that divorce was to be avoided at all costs, except in the case of adultery. Others were more loose about it. They thought you should be able to get a divorce for much smaller reasons. But again, in the gospel lesson, they really don't care about the substance of the issue. They're just trying to trap Jesus into taking one side or another, in the debate. They wanted to catch Jesus up in those moral politics...the games we broken human beings love to play.

Now, like us, the pharisees lived in a world where divorces happened all the time. They assumed, like we do, that divorce was kind of a normal part of life. So they're asking how a person can go through a divorce and still be OK with God. In short: How are we to divorce with as few consequences, as possible? Different people would give you different answers on that.

But you see how Jesus *does not cooperate with the question*. He does not offer any way to get around the basic brokenness of humanity. He points to the reality of divorce as just

one more sign of the tragedy that the power of sin inflicts on human life. The tragic situation that we human beings cannot get ourselves out of. So Jesus is obviously not going to give us pointers on how to get around our problems in the easiest way possible. Instead—and this hurts—he holds us up to what we were supposed to be from the beginning. He points to that Genesis lesson, and says that in the beginning men and women were created to become one flesh. He’s pointing out that if we live in a world where the deepest commitments are broken regularly, and one flesh is torn in two…how wrong is that? What does that say about this world? What does that say about our situation as human beings? Try to see this from God’s perspective: Here we are, asking him how we can go on sinning with the fewest consequences. But from God’s point of view, it’s like: we’re asking Jesus how we can go on sinning.

Jesus is simply saying (as he says in so many other places in so many ways), “this is who you were supposed to be. And you’re not.” He’s not that way just about divorce—he’s that way towards any kind of sin. What really makes me sad is when people are excluded from Christian communities because of divorce. How can that be? Last week Jesus told us to cut our hands off if they cause us to sin; next week he tells us to give up all our worldly possessions in order to follow him. So if you ever hear of Christians excluding divorced people from their fellowship, check to see if those Christians have hands, or if they live in houses. And if they do, you’ll know they’re extending a mercy to themselves that they’re not showing to others.

But there’s a pattern in these harsh gospel lessons we’ve been hearing these weeks. Jesus always goes to the root of the problem. He goes straight to the state of sin that tears us apart from each other in the first place. To do anything less would be a useless bandaid religion. He wants us to see the horrible depth of our real problem, so we don’t keep trying to put little bandaids on it. Here is a Lord who never compromises with sin. All sin must be put to death.

And you know, we who know him as our Lord and Savior would not want it any other way. Because we know who pays for us. We know who loves us so passionately that he took the full weight of our brokenness on himself, and it tore him apart. He loves us too much to allow us to rationalize our problems and make excuses for not being the people we should be. He doesn’t want us to waste our time trying to keep up appearances while continuing as slaves to guilt and fear. God doesn’t want us to put bandaids on our wounds and act self-sufficient while we bleed to death. Our sin is too big for us. But it’s not too big for the One who went to the cross for us.

So we are people who don’t make excuses. We are people who confess our sins together. Not just a little bit at a time but the whole painful mess. Because we know holds our lives in his hands. We know who we belong to. We know who we are in his eyes.

It’s strange being a Christian. On the one hand we admit our complete brokenness and weakness before God. On the other hand, it’s so liberating, knowing that we are never going to be able to save ourselves, we’re never going to be able to build ourselves up to the point where we deserve this life, or the future he wants to give us. In Christ, God has

lifted us up from death to be his sons and daughters. That's his promise. So now we are free BE, and we are free to DO. Without thinking our lives and our future depend on it, without trying to build ourselves up, we can simply and confidently take hold of all the ways we can improve our lives and our marriages. We can read all the marriage books and fail to do half of what they tell us to do. And then we can read them again and keep on working at it. Trying our hardest to be the husbands and wives we can be is not going to save us. But it definitely is going to remind us of who HAS saved us. Without wallowing in guilt, without wallowing in self-justification, we trust in God's forgiveness for us, and take hold of all the ways we can make things right—right now—in our relationships.

Jesus' sacrifice is the foundation of our lives. The Spirit gives us power to repent and change our ways. He gives us his power, to deal with sin and failure and not run away from it. Power to heal and power to live a life of forgiveness with each other...in our marriages, at work, at home. We're not going to receive this power someday when we finally sort through our personal troubles. It's ours today. Let's believe it. Let's live it.