

SERMON

+ Pentecost 20; Lectionary 27 B

October 6, 2024

“What did Moses command you?” Jesus asks.
But you know that he knew very well what Moses said.
And for that, Jesus could have easily answered, “Yes.”
“Yes, it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife.”
There was no dispute about that.

But they asked the question to test him,
so there must be something more going on.
And there is.

Here, from Deuteronomy, is what Moses said.
“Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman,
but she does not please him
because he finds something objectionable about her,
and so he writes her a certificate of divorce,
puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house...” (Dtr 24:1)

The reason this is a test is this phrase:
“he finds something objectionable about her.”
There were two main camps among the Jewish rabbis
divided over what that phrase meant.

Some thought the objectionable thing
could only be infidelity or some other egregious wrong.
But others thought it was within a man’s right
to divorce his wife over any little trivial incident
like if she scrambled his eggs that morning
when he asked for sunny side up.

So the Pharisees ask Jesus this question to test him –
to judge between these two camps in their age-old dispute.
Test him, of course, because no matter how he ruled,
he would anger one party or the other.

But Jesus doesn’t fall for it.
He doesn’t get into picking nits over points of law,

or provide guidelines for divorce as the Pharisees wanted.

He's focused instead on God's intention
for whole and loving relationships
illustrated in the scripture that he quotes –
the creation of the woman and the man,
our first reading for the day.

What we discover there is that for the first and only time,
something that God created is not good,
and it's the fact that the man is alone.

So, God parades a whole creation full of creatures past the man,
but none of them proves to be the right partner for the man.

Until at last! from the very substance of the man himself,
God provides a true companion for the man.
He is no longer alone. And it is good.

And the point is that God's intention for us in creation
is that we are a creature that lives in community –
a creature that lives AS community
in right and whole relationship with one another.

We need each other by our very essence.
We are made to live in relationship with one another –
whole and perfect relationships,
dependent and dependable relationships,
faithful, steadfast, and trusting relationships.
That is God's intention for us
and the design of life in the Kingdom of God.

We are a creature made to need one another.
A creature made complete
when we are in communion with others.
A creature that depends on one another.

And that is why Mark goes on to tell
of this incident with the little children
in which, true to the society of their day,

the disciples try to protect Jesus
from these marginalized and impure creatures.

But for Jesus, they, too, are integral, model members of the community
dependent on others and trusting,
receiving God's love by grace
apart from any worth they may feel
has earned them a place in the kingdom,
the way we adults tend to think.

And that's what makes them models for us
for receiving the kingdom of God.

But at the same time,
we creatures created to be community
are also creatures whose default mode
is to look after ourselves first.
We think we can go it alone,
and that is not good.
It's called sin, and it's the nature of us.
The driving force of the old you in us.
The hardness of heart Jesus identified in the Pharisees.

And that self-centeredness means that
the relationships we form and the communities we make
are fraught with brokenness and stress
and division and antagonism.
Like divorce in a marriage.

And when our human sin causes those relationships
to get damaged or broken, strained or stressed, it always hurts.

It hurts the two whose relationship is directly affected, of course,
but it also hurts everyone around them:
children and siblings, friends and neighbors,
loved ones and church family.
It affects us all.

And that's Jesus' concern:
that the community suffers,

that we hurt one another
whenever our relationships are impacted
by the consequences of our human sin.

And so, Jesus is uncompromising about it.
Divorce is wrong
just the same way that fighting with your sister is wrong
and arguing with your neighbor is wrong
and sniping at your spouse is wrong
and belittling your kids is wrong,
and kicking the dog is wrong:
it's wrong because it hurts that relationship.
And suffering and pain is not God's intention for us.

We all know the hurt of relationships victimized by human sin,
whether we are part of the half of marriages that end in divorce
or because we had harsh words this morning with someone at home.

There is much that is not good
about the world and the relationships and community we live in.
It's the world that the old you in us thrives in.
It's the world that the self-centered sinner of us relishes.
It's the world where individualism and rights flourish.
It's the world where hard-heartedness rejects others who are not us.
It's the world where division and acrimony deepen and grow.

The irony is that even Jesus, in this very teaching,
is bearing the pain of strained relationships.
With the leaders of his own faith
who have tested him with this question in the first place,
and with those whom he has called to follow him
who clearly still don't understand him.

Yet, this same Jesus, so concerned with the pain of sin
on human community and relationship,
is on his way to Jerusalem even as he speaks
so that he can be betrayed into human hands,
take his place on the cross
and die for these same people – all of them,
the disciples, the children, the Pharisees –

he dies in perfect love for them all
to reconcile their relationship to God the Father
who sent him for this very purpose.

We know of the incredible sacrifice Jesus made
to unite us to himself and to one another
even as those he dies for disappear out of fear,
or make outlandish accusations against him,
or nail him to the cross.
And make no mistake, it hurt.

But we also know the joys of human community
that cares for one another,
supports one another,
helps one another,
laughs and cries with one another.

And we know the promise of God
and the ways of the Kingdom of God
Jesus comes and dies to bring us.

There is the gift of the new you
brought to birth in baptism to live in that kingdom,
the gift of salvation and eternal life,
the love from which nothing can separate us,
the presence and power of God's Holy Spirit with us,
the promise of the resurrection,
the fullness of communion with our Lord,
with one another, and with all God's saints,
and the unity and community Christ makes of us
as his own body alive today.

We bear the scars of our suffering and separation
while we also live in the forgiveness and new life
that God gives to us in Jesus' death and resurrection.
That is God's good intention for us
no matter how much hurt
we experience or have caused along the way.

That is life in the kingdom –

life in baptismal promise, forgiveness,
and the grace of God.
Thanks be to God.