

COVENANT LIVING

Proper 22 Year B: Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12
Psalm 8
Mark 10:2-16

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Key Passages: *But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart [Moses] wrote this commandment for you. ... Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”* (Mark 10:5,15)

This is one of those times that I wish we weren't lectionary people. I would like the freedom to choose some other passage for our reflection today. This past week has brought another onslaught of political acrimony, an earthquake and devastating tsunami, the continuing heartache of people victimized by sexual assault, and shootings on our streets and in our homes. Amid all the swirling feelings of despair, anger, and mistrust, I would look for something more comforting and less demanding.

But it is precisely in the most challenging times that we need to see and hear the gospel. That is why we come here week after week. Wrestling with this challenging text will point us to the gospel, the good news of God's love and forgiveness. As we put ourselves under the discipline of the passages set before us, we will find God's message for us in the midst of our struggles as faithful disciples.

I know this passage is hard for many of us to hear. I daresay that all of us have been touched by issues of marriage and divorce. Perhaps this passage lands on you today with all the harshness and judgment that has caused you much pain. Whether it is the question of who may marry--“male and female”, Jesus says as he quotes Genesis, or the permissibility of divorce, or remarriage as adultery—we find ourselves reeling. What is Jesus' teaching? Is he condemning those of us who are divorced, or remarried, or in same-gender relationships? Where is the good news? My friends, it is here, and our looking for it will bring us more deeply into God's love. Please hear that, if you don't remember anything else this morning.

As the prosaic Presbyterian I was raised to be, I am going to make three points in this sermon. First, for Jesus and fellow Jews, discussion about marriage is both literal and metaphorical. Second, this teaching must be acknowledged and placed in dialogue with sayings and actions of Jesus in other situations. Third, the Episcopal Church's teachings about marriage and divorce are consistent with God's plans for our wellbeing.

First point. When Jesus is asked about marriage and divorce, the conversation is about what is and is not permitted in Jewish law. Clearly the relationships established in marriage are crucial to human wellbeing, and faithfulness to marriage vows is fundamental to those relationships. And marriage is also a way of understanding the relationship of God with humans. It is a strong tradition in the Hebrew prophets, beginning with Hosea and continuing with Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel.

Israel is described as God's bride; the covenant relationship between God and the people is a marriage, based on mutual faithfulness and intimacy. When the people of Israel abandon their relationship with God, "following after other gods," they are committing a form of adultery. Divine judgment arises from God's sense of abandonment, that the people have forgotten where their loyalties lie. They are rejecting God's promise that their own peace and flourishing lie in their right relationship with the one who has created and loved them.

The teaching of Jesus about marriage and divorce should be understood in the context of covenant living, in which parties pledge their mutual love and faithfulness, creating a trustworthy foundation for living together. This pledge is lived out day to day, in words and actions and decisions that nurture the love and forgiveness and reconciliation that God desires for all people. The lament for unfaithfulness is real. It's God's heartache when relationships are broken. God's desire for healing and restoration is utterly reliable, made visible in the sacrificial love of Christ, betrothed to the church in a pledge of undying faithfulness. In the Book of Revelation, God's triumph is celebrated as the marriage of the Lamb, whose bride is the church. (Revelation 19:7)

Second point. This passage in Mark is part of Jesus' teaching about the meaning of discipleship. He speaks of his own impending death and he challenges his followers. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," (Mark 8:34). His harsh words underscore the seriousness of the message: "If your hand offends you, cut it off." (Mark 9:43). The language about the meaning of marriage is part of that seriousness, part of the call to live into new patterns that challenge our complacency and our comfort.

Jesus' own teaching about marriage and adultery is delivered to the disciples, the ones who are closest to him. To them he reveals both the suffering and the vision of a new life in which God's love is perfected in us, in the reign of love, in the kingdom of God. This passage is another instance in which he takes the letter of the law, in this case, Mosaic law permitting a man to divorce his wife, and reframes the discussion. He denounces the "hardness of heart" that leads to oppressive divorce laws based on patriarchy and the inferior position of women and points to a different vision.

Jesus is urging a higher standard, a commitment of heart and mind rather than reliance on legalisms. He is reiterating God's historic demand to the people of Israel: loving God with heart, soul, mind, and body and one's neighbor as oneself. That is the heart of discipleship, a way of life that looks not at what is *permissible* under the law, but what is *possible* in the unfolding divine reign of peace, mercy, and justice.

Marriage, then, like other human relationships, is shaped by our relationship with God. As we experience God's forgiveness and love, we are freed to offer that love and forgiveness to others. In turn, these relationships become ways in which we glimpse the discipline and the joy of the life that Jesus offers. We learn the meaning of sacrifice, of being willing to examine our own hearts and in putting other's needs ahead of our own. We learn the meaning of patience and of giving and receiving forgiveness. We learn the joy of intimacy shared with one who knows us and loves us deeply.

Jesus' teaching about discipleship is harsh because the stakes are high. The urgency comes from God's desire that we use what precious time we have to live as fully and freely as God created us to be. Pointing us to the new life that God promises means taking seriously the ways in which we struggle to understand and live out those promises. It means acknowledging the times we lose our way, make false choices, hurt one another, claim unearned privileges and engage in patterns of oppression and inequality.

Third point. Marriage is a school of love. This premise undergirds the Episcopal Church's understanding of marriage and its rules around marriage and divorce. It is rooted in the belief that God creates us to live in covenant relationship with each other, and for many people, this means the covenant of marriage. Entering into such a covenant requires self-examination on the part of two people within the community of discernment that we call the church. Our understanding of marriage as a lifelong commitment blessed by God has been strengthened by the inclusion of same-gender relationships in the marriage covenant. We affirm the wideness of God's invitation into the intimacy and joy of faithful relationships as part of God's plan for our happiness as we move beyond the patriarchy embedded in some of marriage language and practices.

In the marriage ceremony, the couple make promises, and the assembled community is also asked if the marriage should proceed and to make an affirmative commitment to support this relationship. In this context, the priest asks for God's blessing. You likely know that a clergy person is not required to marry anyone if there is evidence that this potential marriage is not based in God's plan for faithful and mutually healthy relationships. You may also be aware that the Episcopal Church permits divorce and remarriage, drawing on our trust that God's mercy is extended whenever we are willing to examine ourselves and commit to living into the demands and joys of discipleship.

Consistent with Jesus' command that we understand the seriousness of being a follower, the Church requires more extensive counselling and discernment whenever there has been a breakdown of a marriage and especially when there is a desire for remarriage. There must be a willingness to examine the motives and circumstances that are contributing to the brokenness and an acceptance of responsibilities that last beyond the dissolution of a marriage. There must be a sincere desire to establish a new relationship that is God's will, that is, a covenant of mutual faithfulness, love and support, that mirrors God's relationship with all of God's children. It has been my experience that many people who have remarried after divorce have a heightened sense of the demands and the rewards of married life, as well as a renewed trust in the promise of God's love and forgiveness as the sure foundation for our life together.

In closing, I draw your attention to a mural in our church that helps make visible the gospel message that I want us to hear today. The north wall of the nave contains a depiction of a scene in Chapter 4 of John's gospel, where Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the community well. Jesus speaks with this woman, and during their conversation he acknowledges that she has had five husbands and is now living with someone who is not her husband. Jesus continues his teaching, speaking movingly about the nature of true worship. After this encounter, she calls others to come from her town and meet someone she experiences as Messiah, who knows her story and does not judge her. This "fallen woman," this member of a hated minority, finds herself accepted by Jesus and in turn she becomes the first "missionary."

My friends, whatever fears, disappointments, mistakes, and hurts you are carrying today, Jesus is welcoming you here. Nothing you have suffered is beyond the reach of God's healing. Nothing you have done is beyond the reach of God's saving embrace. We come together to affirm our trust in God's mercy and to learn to live in covenant with God and each other. As Jesus welcomes the children in today's gospel, so he welcomes you into his embrace. Receive his embrace with the trust of a child who recognizes God's love. Let no one stop you from drawing near.

May we all receive with gratitude these words of Jesus: "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)