

20Pentecost, Mark 10:2-16
Rev. Kimberly Glenn
October 6, 2024

Test us, O Lord. Examine our hearts and our minds. Your love surrounds us. Guide us, lead us, to walk faithfully with you. Amen,

Walking faithfully with God is something we can all choose to do. But walking faithfully day after day is hard. It is hard to avoid the distractions and temptations the world puts in front of us. And yet we want to be faithful. Most of us are in church today or listening online because we want with all our hearts to be faithful. We believe the Bible is here to show us how to be faithful; that God reveals the way for us to follow Him in scripture.

Yet we all know that scripture can be taken out of context. It can be misinterpreted and misapplied. It can be used to inflict pain. It can be used to incite violence. We know that using it that way is wrong and yet we see and hear people do it.. Jesus demonstrates for us the way that God wants us to live; to live in love with humility and compassion and not hatred and violence. We know that doing otherwise is counter to God's will for us. So how can we better understand texts like those; like the one that is put before us today?

What we *don't* do is pretend like the difficult texts are not there. It would be easy for me to gloss over tough texts and choose to preach on an easier text. But I always wonder, would you be left thinking that it's okay to just ignore the hard verses? We know from experience that it's the way of life that hard things happen. We run up against the wall and we discover that tackling the hard things in life is what actually teaches us the most.

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So stick with me here. Our text today includes a passage about the subject of divorce. Not YOUR divorce, not your neighbor's divorce, not any divorce or marriage break-up in particular. It is about broken relationships writ large. It is about humanity's inability to rise to the ideal that God had in mind when He created human beings; when He ordained the sacrament of marriage.

God's ideal for human beings is spelled out to us in the story of creation. God said in Genesis 2 that man was not created to live life alone. He said in chapter two of Genesis, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper to be his partner." (Gen 2:18) His intention for us was set forth at the very beginning, that each of us should have a partner in this life.

We know from experience that two are better than one; that we are better, and we *become* better, when we are connected with another person. But we know, too, that partnership can be challenging. We know that relationships sometimes just don't work. That was true from the very beginning and our Bible acknowledges that. Way back in the twelfth century before Christ, when the law of Moses was established, it included an accommodation for marital dissolution.

The Pharisees knew about that law. The whole society knew about that law. That is why Mark lets us know in his gospel that when the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce, as we heard in the text today, they asked him the question in order to test him not to learn something new. It seems like the Pharisees and other people who opposed him were always trying to trip him up, to back him into a corner not physically but with words. They wanted Jesus to stumble and say something out loud that would get him in

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trouble with the authorities. They wanted to accuse him and have him tried in the courts for committing blasphemy. One of the jobs of the high priestly court, the Sanhedrin, was to try people for blasphemy. Jesus' opponents were slimy and passive aggressive but Jesus was so popular they couldn't be direct, otherwise the crowds who followed Jesus might rise up against them. Even though their intent was to take him out, they always approached him with caution. They hoped to build a case against him.

But Jesus was humble and he was intellectually sharp as a tack. He didn't yell or argue with the Pharisees. Yet he always managed to cleverly turn the tables on them. You might recall that when they asked him whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, Jesus didn't answer the question they asked. Instead, he answered them with a larger, broader response. He said, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God that which is God's.' He took an eagle's eye view of Moses' law and broadened it to fit the circumstances of the day.

In today's text, Jesus broadens or expands the law of Moses about divorce. The Hebrew law, the law of Moses, was written within a patristic society. Men were dominant and the law was written to protect their interests. In the Hebrew culture, women and children were the property of men. Women belonged either to their fathers or their husbands. Children were the women's responsibility but they were the property of the men. Jesus recognized that the women and children of divorce were extremely vulnerable to poverty and homelessness. His interpretation of the law of divorce gave women as much access to initiating a divorce as men had long been granted. He didn't say the law of Moses was null and void. He did not say that divorce was forbidden. In

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his response he demonstrated that care needed to be shown to women, and by extension to children.

However, and this is important, he was not saying that marital relationships should never end. He was, in a way, acknowledging that sometimes it was right for those relationships to end, especially when anyone in the relationship was being harmed. In his re-interpretation for the Pharisees, Jesus emphasized God's ideal human relationship model that was put forward in the story of creation. In Genesis, God's ideal was that two people should come together in marriage and become one flesh. We say that in marriages today. Marriages that are bound with God's Holy Spirit in it from the beginning have the best chance of sustaining and reflecting the ideal. But because of the hardness of human hearts, because sometimes we human beings just can't get along, accommodations are made. Moses incorporated accommodations in the Hebrew law. Accommodations are made today, too. We realize that it is best for some relationships to end. The accommodations allow a legal severing of the joined couple into two separate but equal entities once again.

This new way of thinking, the emphasis on equal treatment of women and men, would have surprised Jesus' opponents. They would not have anticipated that response. But what about the most difficult verses in the passage, that remarriage after divorce is the same as adultery - for both women and men. How can that be redeemed? Would we rather just ignore that Jesus said that? That would be easy to do. But like I said earlier, we learn the most and grow the most in our faith when we tackle hard things. And this is a hard thing. This particular text appears in Mark's, Matthew's and

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Luke's gospels. It shows up in each gospel with very little differences in the wording.

When that kind of repetition happens, I pay attention. We all should.

Jesus was addressing an issue that was a hot button issue in his time. It appears that people were deeply concerned about their accountability to the vows made in the sacrament of marriage. Those vows are important, as are ordination vows and baptismal promises made before God. What happens when those vows are broken? Is divorce a sin? Is remarriage a sin? The answer, I believe, is that anytime relationships are broken, whether marital or business or friendships, it is a sin. God's ideal is unity, companionship, compassion and care for each other. The two most important commandments say that, too. Love God with all your heart, your mind and your strength and love your neighbor, that is to say all other human beings, as yourself.

We have a remedy, though, in our own baptismal covenant. When we make the promises in that covenant with God we say that whenever we sin, not IF we sin, we promise to repent and return to the Lord. It is not easy, but we confess our sinfulness as we do each Sunday in the Confession of Sin, and we repent. Repent means to change our attitude, to turn our hearts back to God. We turn to God and God forgives.

Another very important thing for us today is that, like so many of the things Jesus said, what he said points beyond the circumstance of his day to the human condition in general. And, as a bonus he shows us in this passage how he read scripture and tradition. He looked beyond the written word on the page to incorporate and bind scripture connected to it. In this case, he combined his understanding of the Deuteronomy text about Moses' accommodation for divorce with his reading of the text

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in Genesis about God's intentions for human relationships. In his synthesis of those two scriptures, he gives us permission to think more broadly about how we read and understand scripture.

It is so true and so damaging that some people confine their understanding to one scripture taken out of context to hurt or diminish other people. Jesus' opponents pointed to one single verse from Deuteronomy to try and trap him. Jesus encourages us, as he encouraged the Pharisees and his disciples and anyone who had ears to hear, to look at scripture more broadly; to weave together the things that are revealed about God from each book of the Bible. Woven together in that way, the scriptures form a symphony, not just a collection of single disconnected notes - some of which could sound like clanging symbols or resounding gongs.

Woven together, the books that compose the Bible reveal God's ideal vision for a full and abundant human life. We are invited to strive for that ideal and we know we can get there, with forgiveness and with God's help. Amen.