

Sermon on Mark 10:2-16
19th Sunday after Pentecost, October 4, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Oh, how shall I begin to address these texts from the Old Testament and gospel today, which are so familiar, yet so troubling to us? Whenever we hear them read, it provokes a memory or a reaction. The first lesson from Genesis, a creation story about how woman was created from the Adam's rib, is remembered fondly by some as one of the lessons read often at weddings, where "*a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.*" But it is also remembered by some as a story that supports the myth that women are lesser than men, that women have their "place" because God created the first woman out of a man's rib. Now, a sermon on this text could serve as a corrective to this interpretation by proclaiming that this story is *really* about how human beings were created for *relationship* – and that a woman being made out of a man really shows how close and intimate God's intention is for human relationships (like marriage, or family, friendship, or even true community). It reminds us that animals and other creatures were never sufficient for real relationship with a human being – only another human being could really be "one flesh". However, too often this passage has been used as scriptural "proof" that marriage was only intended by God for a man and a woman, or religious language against same-sex marriage. Instead of being a positive statement about God's gift of relationship for human beings, this passage has been used as a weapon in the "marriage wars" which have so long divided us!

The gospel passage can also be painful for many to hear, because in it Jesus speaks about that tender subject of divorce – which directly affects so many of us. Jesus seems to have harsh words for those who have gone through divorce – he even says, according to the passage, that "whoever divorces their husband or wife and marries another commits adultery." Then Jesus quotes the Old Testament passage from Genesis, that two have become one flesh, and therefore, "what God has joined together, let no one separate." Such words have led clergy to keep many women and men in harmful, abusive marriage relationships over the years. The result is that we hearers can either react with hurt, shame, embarrassment or anger – or we close our ears and look away.

Because this touches such a tender nerve, we pastors are advised that we *must* address this passage in our sermon when this gospel is read. Too many preachers have used Jesus' words here to enforce the biblical "law" and church teaching against adultery, seeking to uphold the sanctity of marriage. But how do you find something positive to say after reading such a story, when so many have

such negative experiences? It seems cowardly to go right to Jesus welcoming little children and blessing them, chastising his disciples who had spoken sternly to them for being disruptive. Even though it is painful, we must address the subject of the pain of separation and divorce, because it is so real for so many human beings. And so we try sometimes to “apologize for Jesus”, or say “he didn’t really mean to say what he did”, or find a way to rationalize what was really behind Jesus’ words. It’s really impossible to do – without doing damage to the text, or finding another passage in which Jesus says something different! So what are we going to do?

But I want to thank Lutheran theologian David Lose for giving us a path out of the biblical morass (a way out of the theological weeds) by changing the “frame” for this passage. He says that we all tend to hear this passage from Mark in an individual way, out of our personal experience of separation and divorce (or that of our family or friends). Because we all do have some experience with this.

But Lose contends that Jesus was *not* addressing individuals here – Jesus was addressing the *community*, and those who sought to control it. Just think about it: how did this episode start out? *Some Pharisees came, to test Jesus, by asking him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”* They sought to trip Jesus up into making an error, that would give him trouble no matter how he answered. Divorce wasn’t really the subject of the test – it was the *law*. “*Is it lawful*” they asked Jesus. Now, you should know that there were several schools of thought at the time about the legality of divorce under God’s law (things haven’t changed that much, have they?). Everyone agreed that divorce could be legal, but the question was under *what circumstances* would it be lawful.

But as Jesus so often did, he refused to fall for their intended trap. Jesus changed the subject – from being a legal question, and made it instead a matter of *relationships and community*. What is wrong with the community that we *condemn* those whose experience of love and marriage differs perhaps from our own, or those who are broken by separation and divorce, and throw away so easily those whom we once said that we loved? What is wrong with a community that seeks to give legal “cover” to men who heartlessly cast out women from their household, simply by writing a certificate of divorce – even when it is allowed, under the law? It’s Jesus’ challenge to the community!

But even more revolutionary, Jesus redefined what the purpose of the law is - for those who seek to test him. The purpose of God’s law, Jesus said, was and is to protect the vulnerable – not to make them suffer more. (For example, in those days, the woman who was divorced by her husband lost everything she had – status, reputation, economic security, David Lose reminds us.) It is God’s intent that every person in such a vulnerable state be protected – that is unjust to just throw a person away. God’s law was created to provide just such protection from our human *hardness of heart*. That’s what God’s justice really is about!

So just as Pope Francis said that the highest calling of *politics* is the “common good” (in his speech before the U.S. Congress last week), in the gospels Jesus teaches that the aim of God’s law is to protect the poor and the vulnerable and heal the broken. This is what the true *beloved community* of God does, as described by Jesus. David Lose says that this passage is really about community, about a community of those who are broken, vulnerable, and at risk, and how God lifts up this community through faith, following Jesus as our guide and example.

This is not the model community as we are used to seeking it, is it? In America today we seem to seek a community without painful reminders of the brokenness around and among us – which is why people move into suburban (or urban) “gated communities” or condos that keep out those who can’t afford it, or sometimes children – who would disrupt our peace and tranquility! We have been brought up to seek community through like-mindedness, wealth, strength, power and independence. We even hold up as examples congregations that are self-sustaining (like *mega-churches*), who don’t have financial difficulties, have all the latest technology in beautiful sanctuaries and an abundance of leaders – who are supposedly “about” the worship of God, but who really don’t seem to *need* God or each other to survive! What kind of Church is that? We seek churches where the members “have it all together” – who have their faith lives all figured out, and services to offer us – that’s where we want to join, right? But sorry Charlie, such a place doesn’t even exist – if it really is the Church!

For the Church that Jesus came to create is that community of those who are broken, who have known rejection, suffering, and pain in their lives, and are brought together by God, through faith, to become a community of healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation – a place of hospitality for others who suffer! A people who condemn, cast out or reject those who are broken is afflicted with hardness of heart, and cannot be the Church of Jesus Christ! So which community do we seek to be, or to become? I think it is that Church which is the beloved community of the broken, a people in search of healing!

This description of the Church leads us to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, when he said: “*Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.*” (1 Cor 1:26-29)

Isn’t that a description of *us – you and me*? Isn’t *this* the Church that we should aspire to be – that we have been called and invited by Jesus to become? Not that Church which condemns those who fail to uphold (or understand) God’s Law as “we” understand it, and casts out those who are broken, or ignores the

poor, simply because they are broken and poor? Isn't their brokenness humiliation enough, without taking the community of faith away also?

So we are invited to look at these passages not so much about marriage and divorce – although these are the “contexts” from which they come. Rather, they are about conceiving a *new kind of community* where relationships of love with God and neighbor have the highest priority. A community where we welcome not only children, but people who are outcast or broken, the addicted, the separated and divorced, who are lonely, who have fallen short of expectations and failed to keep God's Law – but hey, isn't that *us?! Aren't we all broken people, failures, hand misfits? Yes, we are! We are all broken people! But you and I also are, each one, a child of God!*

So today, we have good news instead of condemnation and shame! Jesus invites you and me to become his *real Church*, the community of the broken, beloved people of faith – where faith in God is our only hope – not our intellect, or our talent, wealth or good looks! In fact, in Matthew's gospel we hear Jesus say just that:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and are 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.” (Matt. 11:28-30)

And so we are the Body of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.