

19 Pentecost
October 3, 2021

“And some Pharisees came up to Him, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife.” Perhaps there is nothing more risky, sensitive or difficult for a preacher to stand before his congregation and talk about than the subject of divorce. I was tempted to use the Old Testament lesson or the Epistle as my text this morning. Divorce, even when heard through the words of Jesus, can open wounds and bring back painful memories. Today, where many if not most of us have been affected either directly or indirectly by divorce, I wondered how to preach on these words without causing pain.

While surely a sensitive subject, there is more to Jesus’ words than merely the condemnation of divorce. These verses reveal something deeper and more profound than the laws and rules governing Divorce Court. “Divorce” has a broader meaning than the one we generally attached to it—the legal ending of a marriage. More than a legal definition, divorce means a total separation, disunion, a cutting off from others. We sometime hear of someone by their actions or by their words have “divorced” themselves from their family, friends or society. They become “cutoff”, “separated” or “estranged” from others.

Jesus is speaking in that broader context. Jesus is teaching about more than the “legal” rights in a marriage agreement. Certainly, Jesus’ words do point us to God’s plan and God’s intent for how we should live our lives in a Christian marriage, but he is also teaching us how we are to live in all our relationships. To understand what Jesus is saying to us today, we need to understand the context in which the words were spoken.

To test Jesus, the Pharisees begin by asking whether or not it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. This was one of those “Gotcha” questions. The Pharisees knew perfectly well the answer to the question before they even asked it. These guys were the religious experts of the day. They knew that divorce was commonly and routinely allowed. The law stated that a man could divorce his wife simply by handing her a certificate of divorce and sending her on her way. Nothing to it—just draw up the necessary paperwork and it’s done!

The real issue for the Pharisees was not whether the law permitted divorce, because obviously it did, but rather what were the grounds for divorce. One school of thought among the Pharisees was that infidelity was the only grounds for divorce. Others allowed divorce for anything that displeased the husband, no matter how trivial. In asking the question, the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus by forcing him to decide with one group against the other.

Jesus responds with a question of his own, “What did Moses have to say about divorce?”

“Well, Moses said divorce was ok if you did it by the book—just get the paperwork filled out properly, have it notarized and filed with the Clerk of the Court, and you’re done!”

But why would Moses say divorce was ok to begin with? Jesus’ response to that question is key to our understanding the full meaning of today’s Gospel. Jesus says, I’ll tell you why Moses said divorce was ok—it’s because of the hardness of your hearts.” That is quite an indictment. Jesus is saying, “God knew the frailty of the humanity he had so lovingly created.”

In Jesus’ day, women were vulnerable and had virtually no rights. They were completely at the mercy of the laws and customs of the time. Marriage offered women a measure of protection and security. Therefore, the intent of the divorce law was to provide at least a degree of mercy and safety for the woman. By receiving the certificate of divorce, a woman could marry again and not simply be abandoned and forced into poverty.

While Jesus' words speak directly about Christian behavior in marriage, in a wider and deeper sense they reveal something about the very nature of God—a God full of compassion, forgiveness and mercy—a God who heals brokenness. His words reveal a God who puts Himself squarely on the side of the weak, the helpless, the downtrodden and the vulnerable.

Divorce—the separation from one another is not God's plan or God's intention for human relationships. Verna Dozier, an Episcopal laywoman and author wrote a beautiful little book a number of years ago entitled, *The Dream of God*. In it she writes that God's plan from the very beginning as told in Genesis was one of unity—where the relationship of man and woman is intended by God to be one of mutual care, help and love. God's intention is for unity and community and togetherness in all our relationships not just in the marriage relationship. God's dream is that all of humanity, all of creation be in unity with one another and with Him. And it is because of the hardness of our hearts that the law is necessary. Hardness of the human heart causes many kinds of divorce.

It is the hardness of our hearts that divorces the wealthy from the impoverished. It is hardness of the heart that divorces the healthy and well-fed from the hungry and sick around the world. In a country as great as ours, it is hardness of hearts that allow millions of our citizens to be “divorced” or separated from adequate health care or affordable housing or children having enough to eat. It is hardness of our hearts that build walls that “divorce” us from one another and divorces little children from their families. It is the hardness of our hearts that the lust for corporate profit causes us to divorce ourselves from the beauty, the care and the conservation of God's natural world....

It is the hardness of hearts that causes young people to believe they have no alternative but to divorce themselves from the realities and the challenges and the beauty of life by the use of drugs, alcohol or guns. In today's heated and divisive world, hardness of heart “divorces” us from those we should be closet to--brothers from brothers and sisters from sisters, coworker from coworker, sometime, even church member from church member.

The coronavirus has now claimed over 700,00 lives in the United States and continues to cause incalculable suffering and loss. But there is another insidious health care crisis infecting our country. We are suffering from a pandemic of “hardness of hearts.” “Hardness of the heart” is a crisis that divorces us from one another and from God. But there is good news about this “pandemic.” “Hardness of the heart” is a health care crisis that does not have to be fatal, and it is a disease for which there is a proven cure.

By the grace of God, hearts hardened and blocked by hatred, resentment, alienation and apathy can be opened, and love, compassion and forgiveness can flow freely and joyously. Walls of whatever kind, that divorce us from one another can be torn down. Through his power and love, Christ can “transplant” a new heart, a new way of life into even the most hardened and seemingly lifeless heart. God can and will give you a “healthy heart” if you will but ask and believe....

That is God's dream. That is God's plan—that we belong to one another, and that we belong to a most loving God who will never, ever “divorce” us.

Amen.