

In the Name of the Living God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

At first glance, it seems that Jesus comes down hard on those of us who have gone through a divorce. What is the Good News in that? Many preachers would like to bypass this text on this day...preach on marriage only at weddings and not talk about divorce at all.

And who could blame them? Preaching about divorce and marriage is like running through a field of thorns...because any congregation today likely contains people who are divorced, divorced and remarried, headed for divorce, have friends or family hurt by divorce..and even people who have been treated badly by churches because of their marital difficulties. It is an issue for everyone, directly or indirectly..and listening to a sermon on marriage and divorce is like running through that thorn field. One wrong step, and someone keeps hurting. But, let us meet the challenge and see if, with careful steps, we can find good news for a broken world in pain.

Some of the Pharisees want to trap Jesus in his words so they raise a controversial issue at that time: whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. What the text does not say is that Herod Antipas, the puppet ruler of Galilee during this Roman occupation, had divorced his wife to marry the wife of his brother, and it had caused such a scandal that, when John the Baptist confronted Herod about it, Herod had John beheaded. So, here is the trap: if Jesus says that it was unlawful for a man to divorce his wife he might well join the ranks of John the Baptist....or, if he said it was all right, he would contradict the teaching of the Torah and be subject to the charge of blasphemy.

Jesus knows this question is not honest. He answers the question with a question: What did Moses command you? In other words, how does the Law of Moses read, the law you hold in such high regard? Of course, he knows the answer, as does everyone there...a no-brainer. So they shoot back the correct reference: Moses allows a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her, according to Deuteronomy, Chapter 24.

Or does it? It is arguable, to say the least, that Moses is giving permission to divorce. What he really does instead is the same that the canon law of the Episcopal Church does....recognizes that, in this broken world, the world outside of the Garden of Eden, divorce happens. So Moses sets forth norms regarding certain types of remarriage.

And what is the peculiar nature of the law favored by these Pharisees? A man could write a certificate of dismissal for what? Some authorities said only for adultery, while others allowed divorce for the smallest and slightest of reasons.

But look at the question. Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?

There was absolutely no consideration to the possibility of a wife divorcing her husband. Out

of the question. This is not an egalitarian model of marriage and divorce, but a system where men have all the power. Gender differences are treated unequally, and a divorced woman had very little hope for the future.

And that was the point of Jesus. These Pharisees get the reference right, but get the spirit wrong...and Jesus lays them out. "So, you give me that Deuteronomy passage as permission for divorce, with its demand that the paperwork be in order? Moses would never have written that except for divorce happening anyway, except for the hardness of the human heart in this world. It is as though he points his finger in the chest of each of those Pharisees and says, "Don't you get it? Your hearts are hard! If human hearts were not hard, then Moses would not have written about what happens when they are not."

This scripture from Mark's gospel is really not just directed to the divorced among us. He challenges each one of us, even if we have been happily married for sixty-five years, because the problem of the hard heart is common to us all.

We all have it. Maybe it leads to a marriage break-up. But also in a lifeless marriage. In an inability or unwillingness to forgive friends. Being judgmental of family members. Discrimination against others...continuing in the "US" versus "THEM" syndrome. Any of the other forms of sin in which we humans become trapped....separated from the wholeness of life that God wants for us. The divorced are no better or worse than the rest of us. We are all outside the gates of Eden.

Then Jesus stops talking about hard hearts. Instead, he comes with compassion, hope, and remembrance. Calling us back to a time before the invention of power games, whether it is the sexism of his own period when men called the shots about marriage and divorce, or today's equal-opportunity destructiveness where either partner can damage the other. Jesus calls us back to a time before time, back to when our home was the garden, back to the intention of God at creation. No hardness of heart....no games, no secrets, but naked and unashamed before God and each other.

Genesis tells the story from Jewish tradition that the woman was made from the rib of a man so they might be intimate and equal. Is this to be taken literally? Or is it far more powerful to consider this story for the deeper message which it really contains...

Woman was not made from man's head so that she should be superior, nor from his feet that she should be inferior, but rather from a bone near his center, near his heart, that the two might be equal and intimate. In this 21st century world of expansive definitions of intimacy and equality among humans, is it not appropriate for us to look in the mirror and question the hardness of our hearts in all of our relationships...especially the one with God?

May God continue to help us look inward and outward, as we discern the model of our inter-connectedness with each other in God, as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit. Amen.