

Divorce

There are few things more beautiful in this life than seeing a pair of elderly folks tenderly holding hands as they walk along a sidewalk.

A testament to years of love and forgiveness and friendship.

Here at St E's we are blessed with many role models of happy marriages.

We are also a community of those who have never married.

And of those who have married and divorced.

And for all of us here today, the question becomes, how are we to understand what Jesus is getting at today?

What does this seemingly hard teaching ask of us?

Must one stay in a violent or completely broken relationship?

My grandmother was married to an abusive alcoholic.

When my Mom was 12, her parents divorced.

And because my grandmother belonged to a denomination that cut people off from the sacraments after a divorce, my grandmother lived nearly the rest of her life believing, in her heart of hearts, that she was barred from God's kingdom.

It was the kindness of a local priest who came to visit her at her hospital bed as she lay dying of lung cancer who finally placed a dressing on what had been a wound — open for a lifetime.

He gave her absolution and holy communion.

Allowing her to die in peace.

Perhaps you know a similar story.

Perhaps you have lived a similar story.

The pain of these stories is that the church has too often, in my humble opinion, overlooked something important in today's lesson.

For too many years, we have read this lesson as cut and dried.

"If you get a divorce and remarry, you're guilty of adultery."

And everyone knows that adultery is really bad.

But look again at today's gospel lesson.

As you know, context is key.

And too often, preachers and teachers have failed to look closely enough at what's going on today.

Today, Jesus isn't being confronted with someone who's getting divorced or one who's living in a difficult marriage.

And that's pretty important if we're to get what's going on.

Because we know how Jesus responds to the Samaritan woman who's been married five times — and is shackled up with number six.

He doesn't dismiss her as an adulterer.

He offers her the living water of eternal life!

And what about that woman caught in the very act of adultery?

Cringing and crying on the dirty street.

Surrounded by men holding stones, just waiting to bash her head in.

As Jesus looks each man in the eye.

Inviting the one with no sin to start the execution.

Which no one does.

Because no one can.

As Jesus takes the woman by the hand and helps her to her feet.

"Has anyone condemned you?"

'No one, sir.'

'Then nor do I' ..."

This is Jesus when he is face to face with people in the midst of a mess.

Like divorce.

But that's not what's happening today.

Today, the legal eagles are at it again!

The same guys who specialize in trick questions, like:

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?”

And “whose wife is she in heaven if she’s widowed seven times?”

And now today:

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

These guys aren’t looking for wisdom.

They’re trying to set a trap.

Remember just a few weeks ago?

Herod cuts off John’s head because John objects to Herod divorcing wife number one so he can marry his niece.

Maybe these legalists are thinking, Jesus will put his own head on the block with his answer.

That’s the context of today’s encounter.

And once again, Jesus turns the tables on those who think they stand justified before God – because in their own eyes they have followed the rules.

Have paid their dues.

And therefore have the right to say to God:

“You owe me!”

Once again, Jesus says:

“Not so fast.”

They ask about divorce, and Jesus speaks of marriage.

They ask about the letter of the law, and Jesus reflects on God’s dream for humanity.

They ask about temporary things, but Jesus points to the eternal.

God intends that married couples become one flesh, and remain together in this life.

Just as God intends for us to love our enemies.

To forgive endlessly.

To sell what we have and give it to the poor.

To take up our cross and follow him.

To wash each others feet.

And yet, do we forgive endlessly?

Have we sold all we have, giving it to the poor?

How often do we in fact pick up our cross?

Or feed the poor?

Or visit the prisoner?

Or wash each other's feet?

If you're like me, we fail at these things quite regularly.

And regrettably, we also fail at marriage.

But when that failure occurs, Jesus is not standing over us ready to throw rocks at our heads.

Instead, he bends down, takes us by the hand, and says:

"Get up.

Your sins are forgiven.

Try again."

What Jesus keeps insisting upon is that our relationship with God is not based on the bargain of:

"If I follow the rules then you reward me God."

That's an attitude which only leads to a lifetime of looking for loopholes.

That kind of thinking is what allowed child abusing clergy to give themselves absolution, then keep on abusing!

With Jesus, the rules must lead to healthy relationships!

Relationships founded on mutual trust.

Mutual admiration.

And mutual respect.

The relationship Jesus invites us to experience is one that grows in the midst of conflict, failure and pain.

That “falling down and getting up” which ever so slowly transforms everyone into something unimaginably new.

A fellow tells the story of his wife who decides to learn how to make a Hawaiian quilt.

She’s never made a quilt before, so before she begins, she draws out what she expects it to look like when she’s done.

The drawing is lovely.

The length is perfect and even.

The colors are coordinated.

It will be exquisite!

That’s what the drawing looks like.

Then she begins.

As days turn to weeks and weeks to months, the quilt grows as a patchwork of colors and designs.

Never quite even, with a random streak of red here, and bright yellow patches over there.

After nearly a year of sewing, and mistakes, and mid-course corrections, the quilt is pau.

It looks nothing like the original drawing.

But it has a depth of color and strength of character that she never imagined.

While no one would say it's a perfect quilt, it lays lovingly upon her bed, a reminder of her 40 years of marriage.

A marriage that, like the quilt, began with plans and predictions, only to become something entirely different.

Yet far deeper and more satisfying than those early expectations ever dreamed possible." Garland, *New Application Commentary*, 389, paraphrased.

And there is this.

Today's gospel doesn't end with Jesus harping on divorce.

It ends with a gentle coaxing toward living life in a way that fosters joyful relationships.

It ends with Jesus welcoming little children – and blessing them.

Telling us that if we wish to have eyes to see heaven's gate – in this life and in the next – we need to become like these young ones.

"Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

God's kingdom is a gift graciously given, rather than a reward to be earned or deserved or demanded.

It's a gift given to the vulnerable — who stand in hopeful need.

Who receive the gift with joy.

Who expect nothing.

And who therefore have hearts that are open.

Eyes that can see.

And ears that can hear the gentle whisper of the God who holds us close.

Yes, in our triumphs.

But perhaps especially, in our failures.

We are all the beloved children of God.

Married and divorced.

Sinners and saints!

And what can we say to that but: "Thanks be to God!"

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