

PENTECOST XX, 2018

Mark 10.2-13

I have always been a lectionary preacher. Rarely do I depart from the appointed readings and preach on a text of my own choosing. Lectionary preaching is important for several reasons. One is that it prevents a pastor from preaching only on his favorite texts, or choosing texts to promote an agenda. And, sometimes the appointed readings force a preacher to deal with issues one would rather avoid. Like today, the time when Jesus was asked for his opinion on divorce.

It is never an easy topic, particularly in our time when the issue has touched so many families. But, it is today's text, so let's deal with it. I want to do this in two parts. First, let us simply try to understand what is going on in this text. Having done that, we can consider its message for our time.

So first, a simple, straightforward Bible study. Jesus leaves His home area and journeys south to Judea. He is on the way to Jerusalem, to the cross, to His death. As Jesus travels along, He teaches all who will listen about the coming of God's kingdom.

"And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'" This is a "Gotcha!" question. It is meant to trap Jesus into stating His position, which His opponents can then use to attack and discredit Him. It is no different than what you see reporters on CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, etc. do to people every day.

Jesus answered them, "What did Moses command you?" Moses was the man who led the Exodus from Egypt. Through him God had given the people His Law to guide their life as a free people. Jesus' opponents quote Scripture and reply: "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to put her away." When a husband wanted to divorce his wife, he took her to the local judge, wrote out a paper known as a "certificate of divorce" and announced it before the judge. And that was all there was to it. It was that simple.

Now, you may have noticed something here. That is, we are only talking about men divorcing their wives. That is because in Jewish society of

that time only men had the right of divorce. Wives were at the mercy, even the whim, of their husbands when it came to divorce.

We also need to note that legal opinion in Judaism of that time was split on the causes one could use to seek a divorce. There was a hard-line view that allowed for divorce only in the case of adultery. The other side had a very loose interpretation of the law; they said a husband could divorce his wife for almost any reason, like even if she cooked a bad meal. What was more, unscrupulous men had figured out that they could use the easy divorce process to have one wife after another – a sort of "serial polygamy." They could use the law to do something that had the appearance of legality, but in truth was practicing immorality.

This is why Jesus replied to them: "For your hardness of heart He wrote you this commandment." That is, God gave the law about divorce as a concession to human sin. But then Jesus continues: "But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." Quoting from Genesis 2, Jesus goes back before the Law to God's purposes in creation. God created marriage as the foundation of all human community. God's will is for husbands and wives to live in a covenant of life-long faithfulness.

Jesus' opponents were concerned about what was legal. Jesus was concerned with God's will. His opponents wanted to know what they could get away with, using the law to that purpose. Jesus focused on doing God's will. His opponents wanted to know what was legally allowed. Jesus was concerned about living righteously. He based His teaching on God's purposes in creation. (And in doing so, Jesus also closed that legal loophole men were using to exploit women.)

That is the Bible study for this text. That is what it meant 2,000 years ago. What is God's Word in this text for today?

Many sermons on this text at this point tend to focus on issues about divorce in our time. Going by this text, however, that seems to me to be a wrong move. Because, Jesus is not focusing on divorce, but God's will for marriage. What God wants are for husbands and wives to live in a covenant of life-long faithfulness. God founded human community by the gift of marriage. It speaks to our greatest need as human beings: the need for faithful love from another person. As a book in my library, Marriage and Civilization, claims in its subtitle, "monogamy made us human." Martin Luther called marriage the best school for character he ever knew; in marriage, he said, "we get our corners rubbed smooth." In the self-giving love of husbands and wives, parents and children, the Church has seen a mirror of the Holy Trinity.

So, the question we should ask is: What can we do, as Christians in marriage and as congregations, to support and strengthen our marriages? What kind of programs and activities might that involve? This could be a book in itself, but I offer two important thoughts for our consideration today.

The first is, recovering the power of promises. In the end, we are the promises we make and keep in life. Christian marriage is fundamentally a promise of life-long faithfulness. It is backed up by God's own promise of His faithful love and blessing of grace to renew and support people in marriage.

This is not something I learned in a theology book. It was demonstrated to me by my parents. Sometime in the early 1970s my parents went through a "rough patch" in their marriage. My siblings and I became aware of it, and wondered among ourselves about. Mother recognized what we were discussing and gathered us together. "Listen," she said, "I know what you are talking about. Don't worry about it. When I married your father, we promised it was for better or worse, until death. So, we will get through this together."

That was it. Whatever the issues were between Mother and Dad, they got past them. They remained married until Dad died some twenty years later. In less than a minute's conversation, Mother gave me the best course in marriage I've ever had. That's the power of a promise between a husband and wife, founded and backed up by the Lord God.

A second thought is: the importance of rituals. Rituals are how we pay attention and respect to each other, in all areas of life, not just in marriage. Rituals in worship are how we pay attention and show respect to God. Healthy marriages have healthy rituals. They include daily rituals and celebration rituals.

Daily rituals might include how a couple says good-bye in leaving home or greetings when returning home. One couple I know has had a ritual of everyday sitting down at 5:00 pm with a drink for conversation about their day. For another, it is conversation while washing and drying the dinner dishes together. Worshipping and praying together are also important rituals in marriage.

Celebration rituals mark important dates in marriage and family's life: holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, etc. One couple I know observes the anniversary of the day they first met in college by going out for a milk shake together, because that is what they did the first time they met. Being college students, it was all they could afford.

Healthy marriages have healthy rituals. They offer opportunities for people to connect with each other and renew their relationship. I once heard a marriage counselor say that if spouses can find fifteen minutes a day for face-to-face communication and maybe go out on a date once a month, chances are you'll do just fine.

I am not a professional marriage counselor, but when I have worked with couples dealing with a problem in their marriage, or a couple preparing for marriage, I almost always ask two questions. The first is: What is your vision for your marriage? And second: Describe for me the rituals of your marriage, what you do to connect with each other on a daily basis and celebrate important events in your marriage and family life.

God founded human community by the gift of marriage and by His ever-present support and blessings renews it in faithfulness and joy. This is the Lord's promise, and by the resurrection of Jesus we can depend on it. Amen.