

The Great Divorce

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Sermon for October 8, 2006

Lessons for Pentecost 18 [Proper 22] in Year B

Genesis 2:18-24

Psalm 8

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Mark 10:2-12

Today we have the ugly duckling of Gospel readings. The orphan that no one wants. The last time this lesson came up in the lectionary, Pastor Paul was out of town, and since none of the preaching deacons would touch it with a ten-foot pole, we had a hymn sing instead. There's a little part of me that wonders if Pastor Paul made his vacation plans, both then and now, then based on knowing that this lesson was coming up, and that he didn't want to deal with it either.

But, as the old song goes, fools rush in where angels fear to go, and you've all known me long enough to know that I'm no angel.

The reason few people want to tackle today's Gospel reading is because divorce is a really sensitive issue. We all know someone who's gone through one, whether it be our parents, our friends, or ourselves, and we don't want to seem to criticize them for making what had to be a painful decision. And yet, Jesus clearly says in the Gospel that the commandment allowing divorce was given to us because of our hardness of heart. He also said that anyone who divorces and then remarries commits adultery. There doesn't seem to be a whole lot of room for interpretation there. That is, unless you're willing to play **Jeopardy** with me.

Yes, **Jeopardy**, the game in which you have the answer, but you have to supply the proper question in order to win. It seems to me that in looking at today's Gospel, we have the answer, but we're matching it with the wrong question - or at least a much different form of the question than was originally being asked.

When the Pharisees came to him with the question, they probably weren't looking for practical advice for a friend who was in a miserable marriage, and had tried his hardest to make it work. Jewish law was quite understanding about the fact that sometimes things just don't work out between people as they had hoped, and this is reflected in the tradition that said that the empty shell of a marriage should not be allowed, or forced, to continue.

In addition, despite what we've been led to believe for many years, while it's true that only the man could grant a divorce, the woman could request it, in many cases with the man being obligated to grant it. One of these cases was if the man was a copper smelter, tanner, or dung collector; all rather odiferous trades. The reasoning here was that putting up with that smell day in and day out was more than could be reasonably expected of a person. In fact, the tradition

said that even if the woman knew the man's occupation before she married him, she could still be granted a divorce because there's no way she could've imagined how bad it would be.

Obviously, from this, we can see that, despite the expectations of other cultures, the Jews did not imagine marriage as something to be endured, but rather, to be enjoyed. It was to be a gift and a blessing to both parties. After all, in our first lesson God said that it was not good for the man to be alone. However, when what should have been a blessing turned into a curse, the Jews believed that dissolving the marriage was the lesser of two evils.

What then, do we make of the answer Jesus gave to the question the Pharisees asked?

It helps to keep in mind the unfortunate role that the Pharisees have played in all of the gospels. They have been cast as the ones who were so concerned with the minutiae of the law that they had no concept of mercy. The ones who felt that by keeping the law perfectly, they could earn God's favor. And the ones who wanted to know just how much they could legally get away with and still earn a place in God's kingdom.

It also helps to know that the question they were asking was part of a running debate between the two dominant schools of legal interpretation at the time: the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai. Hillel taught that a man could divorce his wife not only if she had burned the meal, but even if he found someone else more attractive. Shammai gave the husband great latitude, but not quite as much as Hillel.

So when the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce, at best they were asking an

academic legal question to see whose side he was on. And at worst, they were saying something along the lines of "Dude, can I really divorce my wife because she's not a babe anymore? And it's cool?"

They wanted to know just how much they could get away with under the law, and still be considered righteous. I believe that the answer Jesus gave reflects that.

To those who were concerned about the law, he said that God allowed divorce because of our hardness of heart and that anyone who divorces and remarries is guilty of adultery. This pretty much says that if your worth and place in the kingdom is based on how well you keep the law, then you've got some serious problems here. And if you think about it, any time someone asks Jesus about justifying themselves through their own keeping of the law, he smacks them upside the head with something like this, and takes the wind out of their sails.

But what about the rest of us? That bit about our hardness of heart sounds a little rough. To be sure, there are many cases where there is true hardness of heart, neglect, cruelty, and abuse. But what of the people who realize all too late that they're horribly mismatched and don't want to be a burden to each other anymore. What of those who were rather immature when they made their decision, or didn't have all the necessary data to make a good decision in the first place? What about people who just plain made a mistake? Are all of these people hard-hearted? Are they to live with their mistake all the days of their lives?

I believe that the answer to this can be found in a conversation held at Hartwick College a few years ago. While Cheryl and I were there for deacon training back in 2002,

there was quite the discussion about divorce. This discussion included pastors as well as "regular people." One pastor boldly declared that divorce is allowed, and maybe even necessary because of human sin. Another one tried to tone it down a bit by saying that it was because of human frailty and the brokenness of the world. Perhaps what Jesus calls our hardness of heart is just another way of referring to our brokenness by sin which prevents us totally fulfilling God's law, no matter how hard we try.

Again, when you consider the hard answer Jesus gave, consider the source of the question. Do you think for a moment that the Pharisees wanted to think of themselves as hard-hearted? Not very likely. They were proud of how well they kept the law, and here was Jesus saying that the only reason that the law allowing divorce existed was because they couldn't keep the law of marriage the way it was intended.

In short, Jesus was probably not talking to the poor woman who made the very bad choice of marrying a copper smelter - or better yet, the copper smelter who loved his wife enough to think that she shouldn't have to endure living with him any longer.

So we're not Pharisees. At least we like to think that we aren't, but let's face it, we all have more than a few pharisaical moments when we're all about the law and not about the mercy. For the most part we're not like the Pharisees, so what's Jesus saying to us?

The same thing. That the ability to divorce was given to us because of our brokenness and inability to always uphold the ideal of marriage. That, and the fact

that if any of us divorce and remarry, we're adulterers.

"Well," I can hear you saying, "where's the good news in that?" Actually, there's plenty of good news. Because what are adulterers but sinners? And what do we know we are already? Oh it was big news to the Pharisees, but we already know that we're sinners and cannot keep the whole law of our own efforts.

We are sinners. Well duh. And God, who sent his only son for our salvation is the God of second, third, fourth, and who knows how many other chances. Understanding our frailties and forgiving us. Knowing that we cannot keep the entire law flawlessly, and treating us with grace.

So then what are we to do here? Do we follow the law or do we live by grace? As good Lutherans, you should know that the answer is yes.

We look at marriage for what it's supposed to be: a gift and a blessing to both parties, and we try to teach that to our children and model it for others. Not putting up a false front of perfection that they either think they can never attain or which causes them to panic when they have their first disagreement with their spouse, but letting them see the hard work that goes into a healthy marriage. On the other hand, we recognize that some marriages cannot be fixed, at least not unilaterally, and that perhaps the most merciful thing to do for all involved is to dissolve the empty shell. But this doesn't mean that we go into marriage thinking, "Well, if this doesn't work, we can always get a divorce."

One writer, and I wish I could remember who it was, said that while marriage may make two people one body, there are times when you have to amputate a limb. However, you try everything possible before you finally getting around to amputate.

The Pharisees were looking for reasons to amputate. Jesus, on the other hand, was looking to save the limb and the whole body.

God said that it's not good that the man should be alone, and we get our idea of marriage from this. An institution which has gone through many changes in the 6000 or so years of recorded history. An institution which says that you don't cavalierly toss aside the partner you have now for the latest model. And yet, despite our many failings, it's still an institution that many people, at some level, put a lot of faith and hope in, because we all recognize that it's not good for any of us to be alone.

And this is where it's important for us to realize that all too often we make the mistake of taking something Jesus said to a specific person in a specific situation, removing it from its original context, and applying it as a new rule for everyone.

It isn't good for any of us to be alone. Not even after a divorce. In my many conversations with people on the Internet, I've heard from Christians who told me stories not only of their failed first marriages, but of how God led them to the people they're married to now - people who have been true blessings to them. Obviously they've broken the rule, and yet God has graciously provided them another chance, seemingly in contradiction to the rule.

Sadly, though, I've read about people who just don't get it. In fact, I read about one in the pages of **The Lutheran**. This was a woman who, after a divorce that she didn't want, staunchly refuses to even consider the possibility of remarrying because she made a promise and she's gonna keep it - even if that other so-and-so couldn't. Unfortunately, like the Pharisees, her whole self-concept seems based on being able to say that she is, and will remain, blameless.

But, as I said before, we're not blameless. And we're never going to be blameless. Our insistence on trying to keep all the rules perfectly by ourselves gets in the way of receiving God's grace. Her prideful insistence on unilaterally keeping a promise could well be getting in the way of God giving her the blessing that I've heard so many others talk about.

So where does this put us? I'd like to think that it clearly puts us on the side of God's grace. Not that we should take this grace for granted and do what we please as a result. By no means! But rather, that we remember what the ideal is for marriage, consider divorce a necessary evil because of our human inability to uphold the ideal, and that we treasure the second chances that God might give us - provided that we're not too prideful to take them.

Because despite what may happen because of the ways things often work in our imperfect world, it is still not good for a person to be alone.

This is most certainly true!