

THE DIVORCE SERMON (AND THEN SOME)

Pentecost 19B-Gen 2:18-24, Mk 10:2-16

LPC, 10/4/15

Oh goody. The divorce sermon. This one is almost as much fun as the one from Ephesians about wives submitting to their husbands.

Right off the bat I'd like to say two things. First, bludgeoning other people with the Bible is not, in my opinion, an appropriate use for God's holy Word.

Secondly, we all need to be very careful with these passages where Jesus seems to be condemning a specific sin, or a certain identifiable group of people. We need to consider what these passages have to say to us, personally. That means that even if we have never even considered divorce, Jesus' teaching about divorce is relevant to us.

I base this pronouncement on two biblical references. The first reference is elsewhere in the Gospels where Jesus discusses the Ten Commandments, interpreting them so strictly that no one in the world can claim not to have violated each and every one. This is where Jesus says that whoever has desired a person not his or her spouse, even if nothing came of it, is guilty of adultery, and whoever has called another person an unflattering name in anger has committed murder.

God does not call us to a "good-enough" love. God calls us to the same all-giving love that God extends to us in Jesus Christ. No one achieves this level of love except Jesus himself, and not one can approach this level of love without the help of God. This is not an occasion for despair but a motivator to approach the mercy-seat of the almighty God in humility, freely accepting God's forgiveness, encouragement, help and direction.

The second biblical reference is that when Jesus appears to be judging a particular sin or a certain type of sinner, his intention is not to condemn (as we know from John 3:17) but mostly to describe the Kingdom of God.

With that in mind, let's turn back to this teaching that appears to disallow divorce under any circumstances.

The Pharisees are asking Jesus about the legality of divorce. They don't really want to learn anything; they want to trap Jesus into saying something that contradicts the Mosaic Law so they can have Jesus arrested. Instead of disregarding the law, however, Jesus actually takes an even stricter interpretation of the law than that of the scrupulous Pharisees, referencing the biblical account of creation, and equating divorce with the sin of adultery.

This is curious on two levels. Adultery was certainly grounds for divorce in those days, but a husband technically didn't need grounds. He could divorce his wife if he met somebody hotter, or if he just got tired of his first wife. Divorce was generally ruinous to a divorced wife, throwing her into disgrace and abject poverty even when she herself may have been faultless. The way divorce was practiced was thus potentially very cruel. And we know how Jesus stood on cruelty between persons.

When Jesus says that divorce makes adulterers out of people, he is saying that regardless of the grounds of divorce, the practical and moral results of divorce are the same as if a grievous sin like adultery had occurred.

Another curious thing is that Jesus mentions the possibility of a wife divorcing her husband. In a patriarchal society only the husband could initiate divorce. Why is Jesus talking about something that didn't happen? It's possible that Jesus is using a rhetorical device, citing a ridiculous scenario to discount the more probable one.

Now, let me go back to what I said earlier about how in judgment passages like this one Jesus is telling us something about the kingdom of God. What is Jesus saying about the kingdom of God in this passage about divorce?

What Jesus is saying here is consistent with other teaching about the kingdom of God, which is that in the kingdom of God people are fed, healed, liberated, forgiven and loved. What Jesus is saying is that in the kingdom of God people are not treated cruelly and arbitrarily. In the kingdom of God promises are kept, and people are faithful to their relationships.

The relevance to all of us here today, regardless of our own experience with divorce, is this: when we refrain from cruelty and treat people with kindness and respect, when we keep our promises and honor our relationships, we too participate in the kingdom of God.

There's one other aspect of the kingdom of God pointed up by this teaching that I can't let pass unremarked. Jesus deliberately quotes the book of Genesis on the creation of gendered people. We heard another part of this story read this morning, where God creates a partner for the first human creature out of that creature's own flesh.

A lot of people read this story as proof that males came first and are therefore preeminent and superior to women, but (not surprisingly) I reject that interpretation. The important thing to me here is that all humanity has one common ancestor. In other words, we are all one family.

A corollary is that humanity is only complete when male and female are both included. In Eden, God created male and female to help each other, to live together in harmony without conflict. Marriage, at its best, is an image, an icon, of the harmony which God intended for humanity at the very beginning: a harmony of both differences and commonality.

This is an aspect of the kingdom of God to which we can all aspire, married, divorced, or single: God intends for human beings to live together cooperatively and in mutual love. Insofar as divisions have separated human beings one from another, the kingdom of God redeems these divisions, restoring the harmony between genders, and between all persons, that God intended at the beginning.

Does this sound childish? Jesus himself admitted as much. It is, after all, to such as resemble children that the kingdom of God belongs.