Sermon, 10/03/2021 *Jesus and Divorce*

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Today we launch not only the first forum series of the year at Queen Anne Lutheran. We also launch the first forum series of its kind.

The topic is "Loss, Despair, and Hope: Finding Our Way through Grief." Dr. Deanna Thompsen, a Lutheran theologian, begins the conversation with a presentation on her new book, *Glimpsing Resurrection: Cancer, Trauma, and Ministry*. Two ELCA chaplains will join us next week and the week thereafter, sharing their experiences around loss and where they find hope.

The word loss has multiple meanings. At a funeral, most people will associate it with death. When someone we know has experienced the death of a loved one, we say, "I am sorry for your loss" to console the bereaved without sounding too harsh or abrupt, as if alluding to the finality of death without naming it somehow takes away its sting (see 1 Cor 15:55).

Death represents the supreme expression of loss, but it's not the only one. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus addresses another "d-word" that can likewise inspire a profound sense of loss. His remarks, however, sound anything but consoling.

According to Mark, a group of Pharisees come to test Jesus. They ask him about the legality of divorce according to Jewish law. Their location reveals their motive: according to Mark 10:1, Jesus and his followers had just entered the territory of Herod Antipas. You remember Herod, right? He was the ruler who imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist earlier in the story. Why? Because John condemned his divorce and remarriage as a violation of Torah (i.e., God's law). If the Pharisees could get Jesus to condemn divorce, they could presumably use it against him before Herod. His fate would be the same as John's.

But Jesus is too wise for that! Instead of declaring divorce to be illegal, he frames it as a necessary concession to human weakness after the fall. When God first created humanity, he made "them" male and female simultaneously (Gen 1:27). Eve did not become subordinate to Adam until after she ate from the forbidden tree (see Gen 3:16). Originally, they were equal, and that was because they were a single being.

That God created the first human being in Genesis as male and female simultaneously might be new to some of you. According to Cory Driver in *Living Lutheran*, "Several Jewish accounts of creation hold that the original humans were undifferentiated mixtures of male and female." One of the rabbis put it like this: "When the Blessed Holy One created Adam, he created him androgynous, as it is written: He created them male and female and . . . named *them* Adam" (*Genesis Rabbah* 8:1; italics mine).

Do you hear that? God named "them" Adam. The original human being or "earthling" was mixed-sex. In the ongoing work of creation, however, God split the original human being in half, creating two beings (male and female) to overcome the loneliness of one. It's poetic and endearing.

A similar idea appears in a speech by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. Originally, he says, every person consisted of two beings who shared the same body. The Greek gods found people in this form to be arrogant and threatening, and so Zeus, their leader, punished them by dividing them in two as male and female.

Today, when we speak of a partner or spouse as our "better half" or find ourselves searching for our "soul mate," we pay homage to Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. We also echo a long-standing interpretation of the creation story in Genesis, one probably shared by Jesus himself.

Jesus and Genesis

In Marks' Gospel, Jesus claims that marriage returns men and women to the original unity they enjoyed on the sixth day of God's "exceedingly good" creation (Driver). Divorce, therefore, is not a violation of Torah. It reflects **life after the fall**, a *departure* from God's original plan and goal for humanity (Powell, *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, p. 200).

"[F]rom the beginning of creation," Jesus says, quoting Genesis 1:27 and then 2:24, "'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. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mark 10:6-9).

This is Jesus' public response to the Pharisees. Notice how he avoids condemning divorce on the basis of Torah while simultaneously depicting it as a departure

from God's original intention for humanity at the beginning of creation. In private, however, Jesus condemns the practice and without exception. "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her," he tells his disciples, "and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:11-12).

These words are admittedly harsh. As a pastor, I can only imagine the damage they have inflicted upon Christians down through the ages who have either been prevented from legitimately obtaining a divorce due, say, to physical abuse or who have experienced the pain, hardship, and sense of loss that comes with being divorced by a partner they loved. Unlike Matthew, where Jesus at least allows for divorce in cases of adultery (see 5:32), Mark's Jesus offers, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "no way out without guilt."

It seems, therefore, that we have a problem. How do we care for those who suffer from the pain and loss that can accompany divorce **without adding guilt and shame to the burden they are already carrying**? Must we depart from Jesus, who even acknowledges the difficulty of this teaching according to Matthew 19:12, or is there **another way** to read this passage, one that reveals a more **compassionate Christ** instead of Christ as lawgiver and judge?

Three Options

It turns out that there are at least three other ways!

One of the most popular has been to focus on the underlying motive of Jesus' teaching. Jesus said what he said, the argument goes, to **protect women** from being abandoned by their husbands. He knew the stigma associated with divorce forced many women to live on the margins of society.

To its credit, the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 24:1-2) at least prohibited a man from divorcing his wife without writing her a "certificate of dismissal" so that she could marry someone else. Composing the certificate, however, was easy. "The husband simply wrote out a decree ('I release and divorce my wife this day') and presented it to his wife" (Harrington, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* p. 617).

Jesus recognized the ease with which men could abandon their wives, and so he rejected divorce completely as merely an excuse for promiscuity.

This reading obviously presents Jesus in a positive light. The trouble is that while protecting the well-being of women may be the underlying motive of Jesus' teaching, the text never states it explicity (Wills, *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p. 91). We need another option.

Equality and Freedom

The second way of reading Jesus' prohibition against divorce focuses not on Deuteronomy but on his appeal to Genesis.

Jesus lived in a patriarchal society. Women were second-class citizens. Men had virtually all of the power. Jewish law often reinforced patriarchal ideals. It allowed men to have concubines and multiple wives, for example, while women could only have one husband. Even sleeping with a prostitute was not entirely forbidden to men (Driver).

If a married *woman*, on the other hand, slept with any man outside of her marriage, Jewish law condemned her as an adulteress.

This is obviously a double-standard. Jesus attempts to correct it by advocating for monogamy without the option for divorce. "To the Pharisees' focus on divorce as a male prerogative, Jesus insists upon the equality of marriage intended in the creation stories, Gen 1:27; 2:24" (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 76). Why? Because the merger of two-as-one not only protects the wife from being abandoned; it also *reestablishes the equality* between spouses that existed on the sixth day of creation when the two were literally one.

Once again we have a problem. Roman law already provided women of means the option of divorcing their husbands. If equality between the sexes was Jesus' goal, the Gentiles already possessed it. Men could divorce women, but women could also divorce men.

Jesus' appeal to monogamy would thus resolve a problem unique to *Jewish* men and women; husbands would no longer be able to divorce their wives, ensuring the latter's protection. At the same time, neither they nor their wives could violate the bond of trust that emerges from exclusive intimacy with another person. In that regard now they were equal. But what about outside the home? Would not women there generally remain subordinate to men?

A Great Reversal

The third option regarding how to read Jesus' prohibition against divorce contextualizes his response as part of a much broader theme we find in the Gospels: namely, the effect of God's upside-down kingdom on hierarchical relationships. As Elizabeth Malbon observes in the *Women's Bible Commentary*,

"Men are not to be valued over women in the new household, nor are children [as we see in vv. 13-16] to be less valued than adults" (p. 487). Likewise, as Jesus teaches later in the same chapter, the rich are not to be valued over the poor.

God's kingdom, we discover, turns everything upside down, placing women and men on equal footing in marriage, children and adults on equal footing before Christ, and rich and poor on equal footing in the eyes of God. This is the reading of Mark 10:2-16 I like the most. It reframes Jesus' prohibition of divorce as part of a broader attempt to usher in God's upside down kingdom across society, not just in the home.

Jesus, it turns out, may have meant to accomplish three goals in prohibiting divorce: first, to protect women from being **abandoned** by their husbands; second, to **establish equality** between husbands and wives; third, to **reverse the status** of women as part of the broader manifestion of God's emerging kingdom, one that simultaneously elevates helpless children and the hungry poor, all of which occupied the lowest strata of Jesus' society.

Application

Wow. We had to do some heavy-lifting today! How do we apply what we learned?

We would do well, I think, to make a distinction between Jesus' strategy and his goals. Jesus prohibited divorce as a **means** to protect wives in his culture from being abandoned by their husbands as well as to reestablish equality between the sexes within the context of marriage. Unilaterally prohibiting divorce will obviously not lead us to these goals (these **ends**) today, but the goals themselves remains essential to Christian discipleship.

Following Jesus, for example, we should strive to **support** those who have experienced abandonment in and through divorce. Beyond that, we should do what we can to **reverse the status and situation** of women who have suffered abuse from a violent partner or spouse, hoping in the process to manifest a little bit of the kingdom Jesus inaugurated.

More broadly, finally, we should remember that, while differences exist between Jesus' time and ours as well as his strategy and ours, the love he bore for us from God **always remains the same**. The gospel, which banks on God's love for us and our love for one another "surely means not only empowering and

transforming broken situations (forgiveness), but also the possibility of fresh starts that do not trap people in loveless relationships but set them free for new life" (*Fortress*, 159). It also provides consolation to those who feel abandoned.

Where, then, can we find this gospel, this good news, this witness to the compassionate Christ if—at least on the surface—it does not appear in today's Gospel?

For an answer, I invite you to turn to "O Christ, Your Heart, Compassionate," our Hymn of the Day, and read the verses silently to yourselves before we sing it. To anyone for whom the pain of a severed relationship lingers, and to anyone who struggles presently in a difficult relationship or marriage, these words put to song, this good news, belongs **to you**.

May the rest of us, as the same song says, be Christ to you and be of help to you.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.