

## PROPER 22, PENTECOST 19, YEAR B, OCTOBER 3, 2021

Today's Gospel about divorce is probably one of the most painful ones for a lot of people because we hear it in an intensely personal way. Frankly, preaching about divorce and marriage is like running through a field of thorns. Let's face it, there is always someone in the pew who is either divorced, divorced and remarried, considering getting a divorce or been treated shabbily by the church over the issue of marriage and divorce. It's everybody's issue, indirectly or directly because you've either gone through a divorce, or your parents have been divorced, or someone close to you has. So any passage dealing with divorce has a way of making us feel uncomfortable, ashamed or angry or hurt or embarrassed, and that's totally understandable.

But here's the thing: When you really unpack this gospel Jesus is not pointing a finger at divorced people. It's not even really about divorce. Mark sets up this scene by telling us "Some Pharisees came to test him, and asked, 'Is it lawful...'" That's the catch. This isn't a casual conversation about marriage, and divorce. It's a test and it's not even a test about divorce, but about the law. There were several competing schools of thought about the legality of divorce. It wasn't about whether divorce was legal – everyone agreed upon that – but rather under what circumstances. And with this test, the Pharisees are trying to pin Jesus down, trying to draw him out and perhaps entrap him so that they know better how to deal with him. Which side was Jesus going to agree with – those who believed in divorce only in the case of adultery or those who had a broader range of divorce such as if a woman couldn't bear a child or if she violated religious duties or failed to perform household tasks.

And what Jesus does is to deflect their question away from matters of the law and turns it instead to relationships. In particular, to God's hope that our relationships are more than legal matters. Questions of marriage and divorce, he argues, aren't simply a matter of legal niceties, but rather are about God's intention that we be in relationships of mutual dependence and health.

Remember only men had the right to divorce their wives which, in many respects, had turned into a legal convenience. When a woman was divorced she lost pretty much everything – status, reputation, economic security, everything – so Jesus is asking how can they treat this inequality as a debating topic. He wants his interrogators to recognize that all laws should be about protecting the vulnerable and the hurting. So, every time we use it for another purpose we are twisting it from God's plan about mutual healthy relationships.

The question is not a legal one, he told them. At its heart, the question of all human interaction, all human community, is spiritual. What did God originally intend? What is God's enduring dream? God desires that we receive each others as equals, as partners, as intimates. We are not to be a commodity, an object, scapegoat, or conquest, but an extension, as Adam says in Genesis about Eve, at last, bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. Companionship is essential which is worthy of tenderness and protection just like your own body.

Now we all know that marriage from the beginning of time has been a contract, usually pre-arranged, where the woman is "sold" via a dowry. This is not what God intended. Jesus reminded the Pharisees, that what hinders the realization of God's dream is because we human beings trade partnership for power. Mutuality for

manipulation. Empathy for egotism. Jesus is making a statement about the kind of community we need to be. In fact, he's inviting us to imagine communities centered in and on real relationships; relationships, that are founded on love and mutual dependence, fostered by respect and dignity, and pursued for the sake of the health of the community and the protection of the vulnerable.

Now, here's the interesting part. Even though the discussion up to this point has been about divorce, that's really not the heart of what's going on here which is why the lectionary includes the next verses. Those verses describe the reaction of Jesus' disciples to those bringing children to Jesus to bless and Jesus' reaction.

This whole passage is about community. But it's not the kind of community we've been trained to seek. It's not a community of the strong, or the wealthy, or the powerful, or the independent. Rather, this is a community of the broken, of the vulnerable, of those at risk. It's a community, in other words, of those who know their need and seek to be in relationship with each other because they have learned that by being in honest and open relationships with each other they are in relationship with God.

This passage speaks to all human relationships and to the ways in which we see, treat, protect, harm, empower, and disempower each other. Jesus welcomes the children, the most vulnerable ones in society, and says this is who God is. How you treat these children speaks volumes about who we are. This is what the church is to be about – a place for all those who have been broken by life or rejected by the powerful who can come to experience God through Jesus as the One who met them precisely in their vulnerability, not to make them impervious to harm but rather open them to the brokenness and needs of those around them.

Part of being human is to be aware of our need. Following Jesus, reminds us that to be broken isn't something to be ashamed of. Rather, to be broken is, in fact, to be human. And to be human is to be loved by God and drawn together into relationship with all the others that God loves. All this means that our gatherings on Sundays are local gatherings of the broken and loved, of those who are hurting but also healing, of those who are lost but have also been found, of those that know their need and seek not simply to have those needs met but have realized that in helping meet the needs of others their own are met in turn.

We need to look at this passage not as instructions about divorce but instead as an invitation to see our communities as those places where God's work to heal and restore the whole creation is ongoing, not by taking away all our problems but surrounding us with people who understand, and care, and help us to discover together our potential to reach out to others in love and compassion? Can we, see that we are communities of the broken and that we are those broken whom God loves and is healing and, indeed, using to make all things new?

We are, in short, communities of the broken and blessed. And that can be a hard message to hear because it runs contrary to conventional wisdom about strength and security. But it can also be life-giving, not only to those who know themselves to be broken and wonder if this is a place for them, but also to those of us in denial, seeking relentlessly to make it on our own, even if it kills us. So let us pray that we may just help folks and ourselves to continually discover God's life-giving grace, love, and mercy. Amen.