



The “D” Word



A Sermon By
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October 4, 2015

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Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon is available at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2015-10-04-AAA.mp3>.

Genesis 2:18-24
Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12
Psalm 8
Mark 10:2-16

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The Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
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Today's Gospel is challenging. It's challenging for me not only for what the text conveys but because it feels like these verses leave little room for discussion. It feels like Jesus makes his point – divorce is not permissible – then shuts the door on further conversation. That's it. It's settled. Case closed. But rarely are things so black and white, so this or that, so clear-cut. The world and our realities are often much more complex than that. In my experience, things usually aren't black and white. Most often, our world contains shades of grey. And so the clear and uncompromising words of Mark's Jesus challenge me and I imagine they may challenge some of you.

As I researched this scripture passage and read various commentaries on it, I've come to believe that it was not Jesus' intent to shame or blame those who were divorced. I believe that Jesus, as he so frequently did, was reminding his audience that a different way to be in relationship was possible outside of what their hard hearts understood.

As you hear the theme of marriage discussed in today's gospel, the idea of marriage that probably comes to your mind is what I'll call the human institution of marriage. The human institution of marriage has shifted, changed, and transformed over the ages and between cultures. In Jesus' day, some of the key purposes of the institution of marriage were property, status, childrearing, and honor considerations between families. It was often sexist and skewed to favor men. In our time the institution of marriage looks somewhat different. Today, marriage is often a partnership based on mutual affection for the purpose of the couple's shared joy. Even within the past six months, the definition of who may legally be married has changed in our country.

The human institution of marriage is always evolving. But it is not this developing human institution that Jesus speaks about in today's Gospel. Jesus points beyond the developing legal human institution of marriage, to the biblical understanding of God's will for marriage. The two are not always in line with one another. God's will for marriage is that it be a sacrament and union between two people that creates a new and lasting reality. The human institution of marriage is secular. God's will for marriage is sacramental, covenantal, and relational.

In our Gospel, Jesus turns the conversation with the Pharisees away from the legal foundation for divorce to God's broader design for marriage. That is, he relegates Moses' law of divorce as a concession to human weakness then he offers a different perspective rooted in creation. Jesus describes marriage as a strong, unifying, and committed bond between two people. He regarded marriage in clear contrast to the cultural tendency to treat commitment as conditional. It is because he sees marriage in such a way that Jesus speaks against divorce as he does. Jesus knew that

divorce fractured and disconnected people leaving brokenness in its wake. This is the opposite of what God wants for God's creation and so we hear Jesus' severe words to the Pharisees.

We would do well however, not to take Jesus' words out of context. Over the years the Christian church has imposed Jesus' words on divorce uncritically as indissoluble commands. I don't think Jesus intended this painful response, which has resulted in the church denying protection and grace to those who need it. As Christians it is not our calling to pass judgment. It is our calling to point to possibilities, as Jesus did. As Christians we are called to support one another and to reach out to hurting people with a faith that embraces the past in forgiveness and opens the future in hope. If divorce is the only healthy response to a toxic union, might it be a life-giving solution? Yes. Nothing is black and white. Ask any person who's been divorced, ask any child of divorce, and you will hear a story that eschews generalizations when it comes to divorce decrees. The specifics of each situation must always be recognized.

That being said, no one should abandon a sacred relationship without making every effort to heal and transform the brokenness. But when that struggle has been engaged deeply and honestly and still has not succeeded, what then? I'm not sure. What I am sure of is that when we fail, God meets us in our pain, enables us to stand even though we have fallen, and gives us the courage to live, love, and risk again.

The fullness of life abundant for each of God's creatures is the ultimate goal for human life. When a marriage serves that goal, it is beautiful. But when a marriage does not or cannot serve that goal, it becomes less than ultimate and may well prove less than eternal. In such a case I believe that God who loved us enough to become one of us does two things. 1) God mourns the reality and the pain that separation and divorce brings to God's people, and 2) God helps redeem and transform that reality and pain.

In the searing pain of human brokenness there is redemption, forgiveness, hope and the opportunity to seek new fulfillment along a new path. As Christians we put our hope in a God who brings order out of chaos, life out of death, joy out of sorrow, resurrection out of crucifixion, and redemption out of pain. This God can also bring us to wholeness despite whatever brokenness there is in our lives. In the end, God's grace and goodness surpass all else and nothing can separate us from God's love. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rm. 8:38-39).

If today's Gospel passage challenges you, that's good, it should! Jesus frequently sought to challenge his followers out of their comfort and complacency. He encouraged people to live lives of possibility not permissibility. And more importantly, when people fell short, when they were hurting and broken, Jesus always offered healing, grace, and mercy. And he still does. Nothing separates us from his love. Nothing.