**On Divorce: Living with Hope in the Real World**

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

October 6, 2024 ~ Genesis 2:18-24 & Mark 10:2-16

Raise your hand if you came to church this morning hoping to talk about divorce. Nope. Me neither.

Raise your hand if all the important relationships in your life are grace-filled and life-giving. A few. God bless you.

Raise your hand if you came eager to hear some Good News, to be inspired, fed by the love of God? Yes. Me too.

Okay. Let’s see what we can do. Because here’s Jesus with, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery!”

I believe Jesus is purposefully engaging a topic that is deeply consequential on both a personal and societal level; a topic that is fraught; the subject of legal debate for. And, that Jesus is doing so not to resolve the particularities, but to open wide the lens of our understanding, to help us see a broader movement of God’s love. Today’s Gospel is only about right and wrong understandings of divorce insofar as that struggle is an opportunity to explore God’s deep desire for our lives.

Yet, I will not blithely dismiss these texts. The words of Genesis and Jesus have been used too often to control and manipulate, often exacting great harm. So, let’s hone in, then open out. Everybody has had experience with divorce, if not in our own marriage, then within our family or circle of friends. With divorce inevitably comes pain, shame, disappointment – in ourselves, in others – even when it is the healthiest option.

All of us – divorced, single, married, never-married, remarried, widowed, partnered – whether we are cisgender, transgender, gay, bisexual, lesbian, old, young…. All of us live with two truths: With the truth given in Genesis that “from the beginning” we are created for life in relationship and union with one another. And with the truth Jesus addresses: the reality of fracture and broken relationships. We’re given a vision of wholeness and the reality of division. This is the meta context, the story behind the story. We come from wholeness in God; we are heading toward wholeness in God. But, being human, we get tangled up in fracture, divisiveness, hurt. Think divorce, politics, war, the whole catastrophe.

In the beginning: The Book of Genesis has two versions of the creation of humankind. This one says the first person God made from the dust was alone and needed a partner. No birds or animals would do, so God took a rib from the man, created a woman, and they became one flesh.

Let me undo inaccurate readings of this passage. Two words: “Adam,” the first man. *Adam, adama*, is a play on the word for earth. *Adam* means humanity; it does not have gender. The first person becomes gendered – male – only in contrast to the creation of another – female. As there is no darkness without light, neither is there male without female. Second, the word “helper,” used to describe the second person. Helper does not mean subservient; in all other instances, the word helper is used to describe the attributes of God! To use this text as divine sanction for the subordination of women is an intentional misreading of God’s creation. Full stop.

This text says that a human being is not complete in isolation, alone. Human wholeness comes through partnership, community. Not uniformity, but complementarity and unity. We are created to be together. This is before the fruit of the tree was tasted, before the fall; it reflects an ideal, of a relationship and world which once was, shall be, and for which we all now hunger – do we not?

Fast forward to Jesus’ day. Some basics: The ancient world was patriarchal. Wives were regarded as the property of their husbands. Marriages were based not on love between two persons, but on transfer of property, status, and honor between two families. According to the Law of Moses, only the husband could divorce his wife. Divorce was a hotly disputed topic in Jewish and Roman circles in Jesus’ day.

Jesus does not engage their debate on their terms. He takes what had turned into a legal convenience for the man and pushes them to see that this law – indeed, *all* law – was and is intended to protect the vulnerable. When a man divorced a woman, she lost everything – honor, family, economic security. So how can they treat this as a convenience, a topic for debate, Jesus asks. The law is created to protect the vulnerable. Every time we use it for another purpose we are twisting it from the Creator’s plan, violating it in spirit if not in letter. This is why Jesus spoke of their hardness of heart.

When challenged to opine on what is legal, Jesus focusses on what is moral. Ask not what is negotiable within the law; ask what is right and good. It is legal to hold immigrants and refugees in inhumane detention facilities. It is legal to exploit the earth’s resources for our well-being. It is legal to direct benefits for health and education toward this community but not that one. But what is moral? What is good? True? What will bring us into wholeness?

Jesus does come down hard on divorce; there’s no clever way around that. But Jesus knows where we live: in a world where ideals and reality often clash. We are given human laws to spell out what we are to do when living in the fullness of God is not yet attainable. Most importantly, we are given God’s grace: To fall short, to be broken is to be human. And to be human is to be a beloved child of God.

To illustrate, Jesus welcomes, embraces the child. Women and children were the most vulnerable. “There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children,” said Nelson Mandela.

So here we are, once again, poised along the way between God’s promise of wholeness and all the very real, acutely painful, divisiveness in our world.

Poised along the way, we have choices. Of daily intention, decision, action. So, I want to say a word about vows and what it means to live a vowed life. Not just marriage vows, but also baptismal vows, and other vows we may have made to God, to others, to ourselves. When we take a vow, be it “to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse,” or from our baptismal covenant, “to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self.” When we take a vow, that which we promise is not thereby fulfilled.

A vow is an intention, a commitment, a step on a certain, chosen path. Loving, honoring, cherishing are promises which every married person must seek to live into for all of her or his married life. “Proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ,” “respecting the dignity of every human being;” these are promises which every baptized person has made and must seek to live into and out of every day.

Our ability to do so is flawed. We fulfill the promises we make some of the time in some ways. Again the tension: ideal and reality. Living a vowed life does not mean fulfilling all of the promises; it means being intentional and mindful of the vows we have made such that when we break them, we do not give up, abandon our hopes, or consider the vows to be of no value. Living a vowed life is a matter of perseverance, of apologies and forgiveness, of taking another step each day, on the path we have begun, trusting in the grace of God.

What God has joined together, let no one put asunder. To this, we say, Amen! Yet when that bond needs breaking, let us proclaim that God promises new life; and let us be the arms of support and hope, offering encouragement and love, as the embodiment of wholeness, as God promises from the beginning. Amen.