



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. **AMEN**

What a Gospel text we have for today. It is one that makes most pastors quite uncomfortable. I dare to say that my first inclination was to just skip over the discussion the Pharisees have with Jesus regarding divorce and go to the more amicable section where Jesus blesses the children. Seems to me that there might just be more Good News in the blessing of little children than seeking the answers to divorce. But somehow skipping the divorce teaching seemed like a bit of a copout.

Whether we like it or not divorce is a fact of life, both today and in Jesus' day. And when I went online to look at divorce statistics, I was shocked.

By 2016, the divorce rate and marriage rate in the US had leveled off, but still it recorded that nearly 50% of all marriages ended in divorce. 41% of 1<sup>st</sup> marriages, 60% of 2<sup>nd</sup> marriages and 73% of 3<sup>rd</sup> marriages ended in divorce. The US has the 6<sup>th</sup> highest divorce rate in the world. The average marriage lasts 8 years and divorce happens at age 30. Farmers, podiatrists, optometrists and clergy have the lowest divorce rate in the US. But the

pandemic is about to change all these statistics as once again the divorce rate is soaring.

Divorce can be found in every age group, every economic group, every racial sector, every nationality and even every religious group. Christians are not exempt from the high rate of divorce. In fact, a few articles I read suggested that conservative Christians were significantly higher than other faiths in the divorce rate. Divorce is something that impacts life as we know it.

In my own family, my father divorced my mother after 30 years of marriage. I married a divorced man, and my daughter is divorced. One way or another it affects us, as children or adults or both. So, I suppose we ought to hear what Jesus had to say about divorce and then try to figure out what it means for us today in our society.

Divorce is mentioned in the Old Testament Canon particularly in Deuteronomy Chapter 24. It was a sore spot for the Pharisees as there were different schools of thought as to how to interpret the teachings. The school of Shammai said that a man may divorce his wife only in the case of adultery and the school of Hillel interpretation of the same passage said a man could divorce his wife for any fault. But both agreed that a woman could not divorce a man ever, as they were pretty void of any legal rights. So even back then there was dissention as to what the Law of Moses said. There were also lots of rules about who would take care of a divorced woman and if she could remarry.

I find that our text today does not give permission to divorce but rather Jesus tells the disciples what happens when a divorced man marries after a divorce. That marriage will cause him to commit adultery against her. So, it seems that the discussion here is about remarriage rather than about actual divorce. Remember with me that divorce is not mentioned in the 10 commandments that Moses received from God. But adultery is one of the sins not to be disregarded in the Law. But many people who get divorced remarry, like my Rodney. Out of her fire into my frying pan I always say.

So, first of all, what does all this say about marriage? I think that like any other institution or relationship marriage is flawed because we are human. What I mean is that there is sin in the world and not only Adam and Eve are

complacent. We too have a sinful nature, so does that mean that marriage is doomed? Not really. But it is also not perfect.

Marriage was meant by God to be a union between two people. It is a relationship where two become one flesh. It is God's intent that this union, that He created and sanctions, bring blessings and joy to each other and their communities. And no one is authorized to disrupt what God has joined together. Whether that be someone inside or outside of the marriage union. And today I am not going to get into the specifics of the union of marriage whether it be between a man and a woman or two men or two women. That is a discussion for another day.

I believe that divorce is serious in God's eyes. It is not what he planned for us during creation. Disrupting a marital union is a hurtful experience. I know that firsthand from watching my daughter deal with the shame and guilt of divorce. It was not an easy time for her even though she knew it was the right path for her to take. However, I do think that she was her own worse accuser. She felt worse about her divorce than anyone. No one was pointing a finger at her, except maybe herself.

A second thing I know is that if you consider divorce a sin, that God's forgiveness applies to a divorcee just as much as any other sinner. God does not pick and choose what sins or acts he will forgive. Jesus was sent to wipe away the sins of the world. He hung on the cross dying a horrible death for all the sins of all people. Our slate is wiped clean when we confess our shortcomings, our messed-up relationships, and our errant thoughts.

Throughout the Gospel I hear Jesus calling us to a higher standard as His followers. He wants us to conduct ourselves in keeping with God's will so that we might be a blessing to our families, our neighbors and ourselves. However, when we fail to keep his perfect standards perfectly, our failures remind us that our only hope is and always was Jesus. The cross and the empty tomb bring forgiveness. And just as forgiveness covers the 7 deadly sins, which by the way are not written in Scripture, of pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth, so too there is forgiveness for divorce.

Often it is easy to become legalistic and see divorce through that lens, but we must remember that all have fallen short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23. And that our only hope whether we are single, married or divorced is the

grace of God. We need to be like Jesus here in this text and move away from the legalistic discussion and instead focus on God's intention.

Our failure to see God's intention can manifest itself by not offering grace to those who are going through a divorce. I remember my dear friend Laurie from St Olaf Lutheran. Her husband asked for a divorce and since Wisconsin is a no fault divorce state, she had no choice in her impending divorce. I think that I was one of the few who consoled her in that fact. She felt shame for her failed marital relationship. And soon it became apparent that most folks at St Olaf looked on her not with pity, but with disdain. She soon stopped coming to church and stayed home to deal with her emotions alone. It was a painful time in her life, a time when her church should have been there to lend a listening ear and offer support.

Our churches, I think need to do a better job of staving off the popular culture of divorce. What I mean is that we should help those preparing for marriage see God's intent in the institution. Marriage should be considered a "until death do us part" relationship and those who seek to have their marriage blessed by the church, should be aware of all that means.

Today more than ever, marriage is many times not considered a church event. For those of us who are Lutheran it is not even a sacrament, like in the Roman Catholic church. Marriage is a legal event sponsored by our government. You even need a license to do it. And when Jesus is not in the middle of a marriage, I suppose it is easier to see divorce as a means to a marriage end when spouses are not happy. We need to remember that marriage is not a problem to be solved. It is a mystery to be lived. It is not a business deal to be analyzed, but rather it is a means by which two people can live life in the kingdom of God in the comfort of their own home. The joy of a marriage should reflect the relationship between God and creation and Christ and his church. Putting our humanness aside this is a perfect picture.

Rodney and I will be celebrating our 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary next month. It has not always been an easy ride. Even though his first marriage failed we have been able to stay married through all the ups and downs of everyday life, not to mention the rearing of 2 children, our careers, responsibilities, and recent health issues. And I do not know any more human people than Rodney and me. We are sinners and fall short of the glory of God. Yet, he has blessed

us with a long and mostly joyful relationship. God's promise of forgiveness, love and grace kept us from divorce.

And we do realize how blessed we are that we have this special union to live in. And blessings can come to those who are single, married or divorced. God provides companionship for all his children. God created us with a need for relationships and provides different ways to meet those needs. He also provides us the opportunity to have a new beginning each and every day. In Christ all things are being made new through his love and grace. **AMEN**