

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday Oct. 7, 2018 Proper 22B
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Text: Mark 10: 2-9
Theme: Holiness of Life in Covenant Relationships

I must admit that when I saw the readings for this Sunday I became a bit nervous. I thought to myself, wow I get to preach on the painful, controversial, and sensitive subject of divorce with the potential for offending all sorts of people, what fun. In fact, three years ago when this reading came up in our lectionary (our planned reading cycle) one person was so upset that they confronted me threatening to leave the church. It took a bit to explain that I had not actually chosen the reading for the day, nor do I ever choose the readings for the day, as they are already set for each Sunday through the revised common lectionary. I learned that when a challenging reading like this is offered, it is probably best to comment on it instead of avoiding it lest people get offended. First, I could offend those who have suffered the pain of divorce if I'm insensitive in handling these difficult words of Jesus and they do not hear that God's grace is bigger than their mistakes and failings. I could offend our gay and lesbian members if I fail to speak to their deep needs for affirmation of their committed life-long relationships and now thankfully marriages. Or how about those who are single and consider a sermon on marriage and divorce irrelevant and frustrating. Or what of offending those for who divorce, even with its pain, was in fact the best decision in removing them from a destructive relationship and moving them toward a life of health, safety, and wholeness.

While all of these are in fact real dangers, I want to assure you that I do not intend for any of my words to offend or be harmful, but rather to illuminate the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to bring hope. I cannot say that my words will not be challenging to married and unmarried, to gay and straight, to faithful and unfaithful. It is my hope that the challenge in all that I say will be in the service of drawing us closer into relationship with the living God.

Until I was 34 years old I considered myself from an "intact family." But I will never forget the phone call from my mother around Christmas time that she and my father were divorcing after 36 years of marriage. I can remember being stunned and thinking to myself, "what is the point of leaving after 36 years?" I must confess that I am still not really through the pain and grief of the whole ordeal and it has changed me and my patterns of behavior toward my parents in ways that I could not have foreseen.

For me this passage is charged with stories, my own and so many others that I have known and continue to watch unfold. Today I want to reflect on marriage and divorce theologically and to attempt however inadequately to consider our particular community in the process. I believe that we as Christians have something

deeply important to say about marriage, holy union and divorce that our broken and hurting world needs to hear. Don't we risk becoming absolutely irrelevant to people's everyday lives if we cannot address important and pervasive issues like marriage and divorce?

In Mark's gospel we find Jesus in another verbal contest with the Pharisees, his familiar adversaries. The dynamics of the passage are such that the Pharisees ask Jesus a tricky question about divorce and receive a powerful answer about marriage. The Pharisees want to test Jesus on the legal aspects of divorce. In response, Jesus gives the Pharisees an answer, not the limits of marriage, but the divine intentions behind the marital covenant. The Pharisees want to talk about what is allowable quoting the Mosaic law in Deuteronomy, while Jesus redirects the conversation toward what God intends in marriage by quoting two passages from the creation story and by adding his own admonishment against separation. Thus, Jesus uses the trap of the Pharisees as an opportunity to teach concerning the primordial and gracious will of God.

Jesus' response serves to strengthen the Jewish concept of marriage. Jesus understands the marriage relationship to be not only monogamous and exclusive, but also permanent and life-long. Jesus has a very high view of marriage that he makes clear by talking about it in covenant-like terms. Whereas a contract is built upon suspicion, a covenant is grounded in a promise of continued faithfulness. God's ongoing faithfulness toward Israel despite their failures, forgetfulness, and infidelity is understood as the model for human relationships, including the marriage relationship. Jesus reminds us that we are made for the covenant way of life, and that by living into this faithfulness despite real struggles and pain we discover the joy God intends for us. Marriage then becomes an example of the highest and most enduring kind of human relationships, the kind of relationships that all of us are called to strive for in our lives because they communicate something of the love God has for his creation.

It is important to note here that Christianity has from its very beginning held that both singleness and marriage are holy states. Both are important ways of serving God and living into our human vocation of ever-deepening love for our Creator. We are all called to a covenant way of life regardless of our marital status.

When I was being interviewed for the position of rector here at St. Mark's, I made it clear that I was in support of same-gender marriage and that it would never be a source of conflict in this parish, especially since a deep disagreement about this issue had led to a devastating split at St. Mark's in 2009. I made it clear that I was not interested in fighting about this matter anymore and that when the Episcopal Church approved liturgical rites for blessing same-gender relationships and or marriage and my bishop gave me permission I would with joy and preparation perform those rites. It has been my joy to be involved in such rites. Interestingly, St. Mark's was the parish to perform both the first blessing of a same-gender life-long covenant relationship and the first same-gender marriage in the Diocese of the Rio

Grande once they were authorized. [Pat Catlett and Karen Smiege February 2, 2013 of and Don Haviland and Randy Michaels in September 9, 2015, and Matt Wolke and Adrian Gomez in April 22, 2017].

“Can the relationship between two people giving themselves to each other for life participate in and convey to others the love of the self-giving Christ? Yes, and I believe the answer to that question is also true for same-gender and opposite-gender couples alike as that seek the blessing of their covenant relationships within the community of faith. What is blessed is the same. What is asked of the couple is the same, namely “fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God.” (General Convention 2000). What is asked of the community of faith is the same “prayerful support, encouragement and pastoral care necessary to live faithfully” yet as a colleague of mine has said, “it is perhaps more profound, because the community is asked to stand with the couple in the context of a church and a culture that are often blind and sometimes even hostile to the grace they manifest.”

As Bp. Paul Marshall has said so eloquently, “To bless union is to ask God to make it an experience of the kind and intensity of Christ’s love, both for the couple and also for all who are touched by their life together. Thus, blessing a union is not to wish it good fortune or merely to give thanks for it, although both certainly occur; it is to set it aside for a holy use, to perceive it to be grace-bearing, to expect God to use it.”

Thus, I believe that what Jesus is saying about marriage and divorce needs to be understood and applied to both opposite-gender and same-gender relationships. There are I realize stresses, and forces of disruption operating on same-gender relationships that are profoundly different from those in traditional marriages. There is also a great deal of important work to be done and understanding needed to adequately support these relationships in the Christian community. What can be affirmed is that Christians of same-gender and opposite-gender affections are equally called, within their respective modes of being to holiness of life in relationship with God.

The passage ends with a small section about divorce that recognizes that sometimes the divine purpose for marriage is not realized. The very fact that the matter needed to be discussed suggests that cases of divorce had arisen in the Christian community and they were working to try to figure out how to understand and address the issues. They are in fact saying something like, “We know that God’s intention is a permanent marriage but when that simply does not work out, and divorce does in fact occur, is remarriage all right?”

Jesus’ response to this question is clear and uncompromising. If remarriage follows a divorce it is an act of adultery against the first partner. However, the words of Jesus are not prescriptive. He does not prohibit remarriage. Rather Jesus is describing the situation in personal terms. If one remarries after a divorce, it is a

violation of the relationship of the covenant created by the first marriage. Jesus does not create a new law either allowing or prohibiting divorce or remarriage. Rather Jesus reasserts the purposes God intended in marriage. He does not soften the sense of pain and violation that comes with divorce when God's purposes are not achieved. Divorce is painful even when it is the correct and wise decision, because it means tearing apart two who have been covenanted together. Jesus' response is also surprising in that he makes provision for women divorcing their husbands, elevating their status and giving them equal control over the marital relationship that was not the case according to Jewish Law.

Jesus' responses to these questions were shocking and difficult for his disciples and they are still challenging for us today. Jesus is his usual prophetic self, calling us back to covenant faithfulness to God and one another. He does not limit our lives to what we can get away with through our legal maneuvering, but rather reminds us of the relational dimension of all of life. We are called to live out God's intentions for our relationships in faithful love, forgiving one another, and endeavoring to help one another grow into ever deepening and loving relationship with God. Jesus reminds us that we are made for each other from the foundations of the creation.

When we see the beleaguered state of marriage in our society, and the bitterness surrounding extending the blessings and protections of marriage to same-gender couples, we might be tempted to despair. But we must remember that we as the church have the opportunity to offer our surrounding culture a renewed vision of life lived not according to our own selfish wants and desires but rather in covenant faithfulness to one another and in service to the world. I believe that marriage within the Christian community is intended to be a sign of God's love for this broken and sinful world. This is made possible through our participation in the life of Christ whose self-giving love is not simply our example, but the source of our life and hope together.

If marriage within the church is to be a sign of God's kingdom to the wider culture in which we live, we need to renew our vision of them as relationships rooted in the covenant faithfulness of God. As Christians we cannot view these relationships as simply existing between two people, but we must see them in a wider way. Life-long covenant relationships are communal events, during which we pledge "to do all in our power to support these persons in their relationship." The failure of life-long covenant relationships within the church is a cause for great sadness but must not be understood as resting solely on the individuals involved. It must be seen also as a failure of the community that has pledged its support of the couple. We as a Christian community are called to do all in our power to support and encourage and protect those who have entered into life-long covenant relationships. We as the church fail if we continue to see divorce and separation as outside of the church. Within the church we must develop and nurture communities of character that can provide the needed support and care to nurture faltering relationships. Divorce is not simply the problem of the couples threatened by it, but a failure of a community

to nurture them in the skills of faith, hope and love that ultimately sustain lifelong partnership.

We are also called to live with the understanding that despite our best intentions and efforts not all marriages will remain viable. We as the body of Christ must minister and care for those who have suffered the pain of divorce. We must resist our tendency to isolate those in pain, bringing them into renewed fellowship and sharing their joys and sorrows, and caring for the children involved.

We as the church must deal compassionately with divorce while continuing to hold up lifelong covenant relationship as our ideal and cultivating a community that can both support and nurture their health. By doing so we will give witness to the firm belief that God opens hearts and minds to discover yet deeper dimensions of Christ's saving power at work, far beyond our limited power to conceive it. In this way, we in this faith community of St. Mark's can be a sign of the coming reign of God. We are called to be a covenant people, a people grounded in the promise of God's continued faithfulness and to model that for the world around us as a sign of God's goodness. May it be so among us more and more.