

“Divorce” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
October 4, 2009 – Proper 22B

After preaching on this gospel passage three years ago three years ago (that’s how our lectionary cycle works – in a three year cycle of readings) three years ago after preaching on this passage from Mark I had more follow up conversations with people than I’ve had on almost any other sermon I’ve preached here. And that wasn’t because I said something shocking or even very new. It was because this passage raises a subject that’s close to almost all of our hearts, whether it’s because we’ve been divorced ourselves, or lived through our own parents divorcing, or watched a child of our own or a close friend get divorced or even if it’s simply because we’ve done all that we can not to get divorced and by the grace of God have experienced a healthy marriage . . . whatever the reason, this subject touches us all and so it’s good that every three years Mark speaks to us on this subject and we get a chance to go at it directly in here through the gospel.

Now the first thing I do when I preach on this subject is to let you know some of where I’ve come from. Many of you know that my story includes having lived through divorce as a child. My parents were good church-going people (they’re still good, church-going people) who did everything they could to save their marriage, but that healing didn’t happen. Which doesn’t mean my family didn’t heal -- each of us did heal overtime and now while we know family differently we also know that love and redemption comes in many shapes and sizes. I also know of divorce from walking with friends through their own painful experience and as priest and pastor for families who have experienced or are experiencing divorce. And my sense is that we can all probably agree from whatever experiences we’ve had that divorce is brokenness. I don’t think anyone would argue that point. It hurts and upsets and disrupts and confuses, pretty much everyone involved – at least for awhile. And since brokenness is not what God wants for any of us, divorce is not God’s hope; divorce is not God’s will in the big picture of who God wants us to be. And that’s part of what this Scripture tells us. I can also tell you that because life is complex and people are too, sometimes for some people being in a particular marriage is brokenness, and that brokenness is not what God hopes or wants for any of us either. And so we are left in this challenging, uncomfortable place with this passage. While some divorces should never happen, some divorces really need to happen, and between those extremes are the many that fall in-between. Nobody I’ve ever met has entered into their marriage hoping that it breaks beyond repair. And nobody ever celebrates that a marriage has gotten to that point. So while celebrating, strengthening and doing whatever we can to nurture marriage is part of our calling as church, caring for those in our midst who are experiencing or healing from divorce is also all part of what it means to be a loving community of faith.

There are also some things you should know about the culture in which this gospel was written in order to help unpack it some more this morning: In the first century and long before and long after that time, only a husband could seek a divorce. You heard that in the passage today. The Pharisees asked Jesus if it was OK if a man could divorce his wife. In those days, upon marriage a woman became the property of the man. And while it undoubtedly often included a great deal of love, marriage was basically a contract and in the making of that contract, the woman’s home shifted from that of her parents to that of her husband. And in that arrangement (which was understood to be life-long) could only be broken by the male. The male

could initiate a “certificate of dismissal” and at the point of dismissal, he no longer had responsibility for the woman. And the woman after divorce was no longer wife, daughter, sister or mother – the only roles that were available to her – and so she had no place in society at all. And that’s some of what Jesus was speaking to in this passage. When the contract was dismissed, the woman’s place in the family was gone and she was literally cast out to fend for herself. To be divorced at that culture was literally to be dismissed, to be cast out, and to be utterly alone.

And so when Jesus was asked by the Pharisees if that was OK, he said, “No. That’s not what we do.” And frankly that makes good gospel sense. That’s not how the kingdom of God works. Dismissal is sort of anti-good news. And it’s especially not what we do as those who have been called to live as one. And so this passage is about more than marriage and divorce. It’s about caring for one another and holding fast and hard to the bottom line of the covenant we have made – the covenant that Jesus established which says that in the family of God, no one is ever dismissed. Period.

Which is why when the disciples try to turn away the children who are coming, Jesus reacts immediately. You think it’s a change of subject until you broaden the interpretation a bit -- “Let the little children come to me,” he said, “don’t stop them. . . Don’t dismiss them,” Jesus said. And right there in front of everyone, in the midst of this intense theological and legal conversation, Jesus scooped the children up in his arms. He hugged them and blessed them and said that in all of this the kingdom of God was made manifest.

And so this whole passage is sort of a weird combination of things until you see that it’s not. “Divorce is not like the kingdom,” Jesus told them. “But embracing the children is.” And so maybe the best way to hear this passage is as the little ones that we all truly are. Children of God each of us: Still growing. Still learning. Imperfect. We are made to love and be loved. But we are also prone to make mistakes, sometimes big ones, and this side of heaven, we’re bound to break. But because of how God works, we are still and forever one, continually invited into the holy, wide-scooping embrace and blessing of God.

Remember that one of our gifts to this world is our belief, our proclamation that we are in this together whether it be as husband and wife, or more foundationally as those who have been baptized into one-ness, as the Body of Christ. The good news in this place is that even when brokenness happens, the embrace heals and nobody gets dismissed .