

Sunday, October 3rd, 2021 Pentecost 19

At my first congregation, in Bucks County, PA, in the mid 2000's, I remember sitting after worship one Sunday in the back of the church, alone, with a woman who had recently started attending worship. She was in tears as we sat in one of the back pews under the balcony.

She had asked that I spend few minutes with her after worship one Sunday, and she proceeded to tell me the story of how she had ended up in Lutheran church, not having been raised Lutheran. She was raised in another faith tradition.

Because her church wouldn't allow a divorced woman like herself to worship in her church anymore, or to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion, she said, in short, she was essentially no longer welcome in that faith community.

She said that couldn't get married again in her church because it didn't recognize divorce. And so she was stuck – a sister in the faith, without a faith community.

Hearing her tell her story, it just broke my heart that her church, which she and everyone else saw as the body Christ, had told her she was no longer welcome.

Marriage was an institution ordained by God, and that what God had joined...and no one should tear apart. And as such, as a divorced woman, now single, she felt completely abandoned by God and her church. She said it was as if Jesus himself had said to her, "you are no longer welcome here."

Now show me in gospels where Jesus says that to anyone! Anyone. Show me where Jesus excludes anyone. In fact, isn't it precisely these people – the widowed, divorced, the sick and lame, the orphan, the child, the sinner, whom Jesus welcomes? In fact isn't the message of the gospel just the opposite of this, where all are welcome!

And so, she ended up in this little Lutheran congregation where I was the pastor at the time. What to do. She was in tears as she spoke, and so was I, but for different reasons.

For her, she was heartbroken because marriage had failed, all that goes with it the shame, the guilt, the sense of failure, the embarrassment, the abandonment of some of her friends. And she felt her church had just kicked her to the curb, at a time when she needed her church, and God's grace and forgiveness the most.

For me, my heart broke because her church, that she saw as Jesus himself, had failed her in her time of need. That it had judged her unworthy to receive grace God, and that it had turned its back on her.

What a horrible place to be in life, and yet we know millions of people throughout the world, who are in the similar place. Dealing with the guilt of divorce, and everything else that goes with it, and her church...the church, had judged her unworthy of receiving the Sacrament.

We all know stories like this...some better, some worse. We enter into marriage as this new creation, this new community of two people in love who have come together, in a relationship ordained by God. Yes, it's imperfect. Along with the joys, there's tension, disagreements, struggles, arguments.

But like my therapist always says, relationships are like a rubber band, when the relationship is strained, the rubber band stretches, and twists, and gets tight. But you stay inside it, facing one another until the tension is relieved...and the rubber band returns to stasis.

But sometimes, the tension inside the rubber band gets so tight that it breaks, or snaps, and there's nothing you can do to piece it back together. The causes are many...it's complicated, and messy...but it happens for better and for worse. Abuse...infidelity... financial issues...kids... and Covid has exacerbated all in the past 18 months since the pandemic started in earnest.

Domestic abuse cases have skyrocketed during Covid, the divorce rate has gone way up; even the best marriages have been strained point of breaking, just like that rubber band.

So when that marriage bond is broken, for whatever reason, in some way, that little microcosm of creation itself – Eden, this God-ordained union representing God's good order is in some way torn in two, rent asunder, if you will, and it can't be put back together. And God grieves. Our community of friends grieves. Our family grieves. We all grieve, in much the same way as we grieve a death, because it's final. Over. And there's no getting it back in most cases.

The very heart of God is broken because what God had joined together – this perfect creation on earth, is now torn apart...broken.

What to do with all this. How can we see God in all of this? Can we see God in all of this? Where is God when two people split up? In divorcing have I sinned? Am I reconciled with God even though church may be done with me? Will I ever be in good favor with God, or my church again? All these questions and more we ask ourselves.

There is a very good reason these readings are combined here today. In our Genesis reading, creation, the 2nd creation story, God has finished with creation...and all is good...*except*, in order to be really complete, man needs a partner. God ordains that humans should live in community, bound together...harmoniously, and not alone. Only then is God's creation complete – perfect. Finished. We, the world, do better when we're together...not apart.

So here's one perspective.

Evil is constantly at work to endanger and destroy that which God has created. God's good creation is the communion between a man and a woman...Luther called it a sort of *estate* – a community if will, where there is harmony among all its creatures. But the devil sows disharmony among us, seeking to do harm to this perfect creation.

Think of sin not so much an act or acts, but as a state – a state of separation from God one another. And so we live in this constant state of being separated from God and one another by our own desire to be God ourselves, to set ourselves up as God, to be in control, at center of it all.

And so while God creates this perfect world, where there is harmony, stasis, good order, shalom if you will, we humans are born into this perfect creation, and proceed mess it up royally. And boy have we done a good job of messing it up. Right?

Enter Jesus the Christ...the reconciler, the one who takes away the sin of the world. The one who has come to reconcile all things to himself.

And so, to our gospel today. After Jesus has his little encounter with temple leadership regarding divorce, he turns to the children in their midst, and says to the Pharisees, “let the little children come to me, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” Ah, yes, he always has the right answer for these little “challenges” presented him by the temple leadership.

Children, widows, orphans, adulterers, the sick and lame, the elderly, the disfigured, the handicapped, the divorced. In short, all of the people whom the world at

the time had disenfranchised as being “outsiders”. All whom the world despised at the time, Jesus spreads God’s tent to include them all, and more.

The message of the gospel of JC is that God’s kingdom belongs to its weakest most vulnerable creatures. The ones that no one else wants. The ones that the world has excluded. The weakest. And goodness knows, if you’ve been through a divorce, regardless of the cause, you know how weak and vulnerable you are - for a long time, for a lifetime in some cases

But I’m reminded of words of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, paraphrasing, nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Not famine, not peril, not things present, nor things to come, not principalities, hardships...not even death itself can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The church is made up of broken and sinful people, including clergy... members of any church council or governing body, musicians, all of us. But none is outside the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Yes, lawyers may give us a certificate of divorce, papers, legal documents, whatever you wish to call them, showing you in writing in a legal brief, that you are divorced. I have them. Some of you may have yours. But nonetheless, we are loved...included...welcomed...cherished by a loving God, and nothing, not even death itself, can take this away from us., thanks be to God!

And so, back to the woman in the back of my little church in Bucks County, PA, she heard from a pastor that day that she is cherished by her god, and her church, that she is welcome in community with the rest of us sinful creatures, and into the body of Christ. And nothing would ever take that away from her. Nothing.

She realized that those words of absolution she heard from me every Sunday, “ as called ordained minister in the church of Christ, and by his authority, I declare to you entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Those words were and are for her, and for all of us.

And then, she smiled. And I cried, because she had understood that God’s love, and God’s church, included her.

Now...was her life all sudden perfect? Was her life suddenly transformed into some perfect state of bliss. Of course not. But she heard what she needed to hear, and that was that God, and God’s people in this place, loved her. And that made all the difference.

Genesis 2:18-24

The LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." ¹⁹So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said,

*"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken."*

²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test [Jesus] they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" ³He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" ⁴They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." ⁵But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' ⁷'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

¹⁰Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

¹³People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.