

It feels a little weird to have this gospel reading today, after being involved with two weddings yesterday. After years of doing bible studies, every time this gospel lesson came up, someone would roll their eyes and say, “ahh... the divorce text...” I’m afraid it’s become pigeon holed as “the divorce” text...

And indeed, Jesus is talking about divorce, but context matters! And I’m not so sure this lesson is as much about divorce, as much as it’s about union and connection. Finding grace in difficult circumstances.

There are a lot of different layers in our lesson. What I’d like to do this morning is reflect with this text in light of our current cultural situation. And then spend some time reflecting with the metaphor of marriage as it relates to God.

Last week, the direction of God’s concern was away from dismembering and toward remembering or reconciliation. This week, in kind of a similar way, God’s concern is away from separation and dehumanization, and in the direction of union and belonging. Let’s take a closer look...

The Pharisee’s in our text are asking Jesus a “got-cha” question, they are testing him. They want ammunition to discredit him. Not too much unlike our politics today.

Jesus appreciates the scope and consequences of his answer. And instead of answering the question in the direction of complying with the law, Jesus answers the question in the direction of what is more life giving...

During the time of Jesus, marriage was much different than it is today. Women were considered property. Marriage was highly patriarchal, in other words the husband held all the cards... If the husband wanted a divorce, the Law of Moses gave him the right to issue a certificate of divorce and the wife would be absolutely destitute.

The wife had no recourse or protection. If she was cast aside, she had no means of support and was essentially homeless. And to get by, she would be reduced to begging and stealing, and often prostitution.

Jesus says that it's because of their hardness of heart that Moses wrote that commandment for them, in other words, it's a law that dehumanized the women and made them victims. This law gave power to men over women and legitimized the separation as God's will.

Now, Jesus goes in the opposite direction. Jesus goes directly to the creation story itself and asserts that God's fundamental intention, is for people to live together in life-giving relationship. Jesus says, "So they are no longer two, but one." Again, the direction is toward union. In our Trinitarian view of God, God is himself a union of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is fundamentally relational... Not hierarchical, but completely self-giving of one to the other.

In fact, this is the sign of trinitarian theology. The Father gives absolutely everything to the Son, and instead of using it selfishly for Himself, the Son in return gives it all completely back. And it is only through the Holy Spirit that this can happen... This is a relationship of absolute complete equals, and of complete self-giving to the other. Nothing is held back...

And God desires for us to be in a similar mutual relationship, and exactly because it is life giving for us, and life giving for our communities. And again, the direction is toward union... away from dehumanization and toward full humanization.

Little story... I personally think divorce is a tragedy. And at the same time, I've also seen divorce as a gift, as something that was ultimately life giving. And this is personal for me. I have a brother who was essentially in the position of having to choose between remaining sober, or remaining married.

And he made the right decision, he got divorced. And it was mutual... Of course, it was a tragedy, and yet at the same time it was the most life-giving decision in some very difficult circumstances. They remained friends...

His wife went on and had a successful career. And my brother went on to earn his PhD, is a psychologist, and a senior faculty at the Hazelden Treatment Center. God blessed them tremendously! Indeed, it was a tragedy, but it would've been a bigger tragedy if they had not gotten divorced.

Relationships are complicated. They can be the most life-giving thing ever, and they can also be destructive. In our gospel lesson, Jesus goes in the direction of what is the most life-giving.

Being involved with three weddings this fall has been a tremendous blessing. Reading this scripture in the context of being involved with weddings, I've come to see it a little differently. For me it's not so much a "divorce text" anymore, as much as it's become a text about life-giving relationships. So that two would become one...

Weddings are full of plans and excitement. Every time I met with a couple for the first time, I'd ask them, "Tell me your story." Ohhh, so much fun! The best stories were engagement stories! Don't you love engagement stories? These are stories of coming together, they are so full of hope and love and promise. They are so life-giving!

Couple short stories... Unfortunately, Kris and I don't have a good engagement story. In fact, it's almost remarkable because it was so unremarkable. After spending an evening talking about getting married, I just asked if she would marry me, she said, "Is that it?" I said, "yes?" And then she said "Yes." It was pretty much a non-event... But it was meaningful for us!

Our daughter Jo, is a little more "intentional" about these things... She and her husband planned a whole day of activities and ended with her proposing in the rafters of their church. She majored in psychology and women's studies, she was going to do the proposing! Women aren't property anymore...

I imagine you all have fun engagement stories and memories, and I'd like to hear them sometime. This past week I went on-line and found a couple of engagement stories that I thought were particularly meaningful...

One story involved a couple and the woman had a 7-year-old daughter. When they were considering marriage, the gentleman asked the daughter for permission to marry her mother.

And after the formal proposal, they returned to the apartment, the mother was excited to tell her daughter. And the gentleman promptly dropped to one knee, again, this time to explain to the daughter the significance of an engagement ring, “and how it is really about a commitment to one another.” He then surprised her with a tiny ring of her own, made of hearts and diamonds.

He said, “In the same way that the ring I gave to your mother represents my commitment to her,”

He said to the daughter, “this ring represents my commitment to you.”

Doesn't that make you cry? You see marriage is about commitment, and not only for the sake of each other, it's also for the sake of our community. It's about making promises to one another.

And being secure in those promises, we have the freedom to reach out and love others; all in safety, security and freedom. This is what makes us fully human, and this is God's intention for us.

And we must always remember, commitments come in many shapes and sizes. Not only through marriage, but also through family, friends, community, jobs, church ... I have a friend getting married in a few weeks, she's a pastor and in her early fifties, I'm happy she's getting married, but believe me, she's always been a faithful servant of the gospel, I guess you could say she was married to the church. I know several unmarried people who are committed in their various roles in life.

It's **the commitments, and the integrity to keep them** that are important.

Marriage is an important metaphor in the bible, and especially for the relationship between God and people. And when you pay attention, and look for it, you start to see the marriage metaphor

everywhere. Throughout the Old Testament we hear how God makes covenants, makes promises and commitments with us.

God blesses Abraham to be a blessing to all nations. To Moses through the law, so it will go well in the land God gave to them. Throughout that whole process we hear a common refrain over and over again, God says, “you will be my people, and I will be your God.” The prophets warned about infidelity between the people and God, infidelity that came with consequences- the Babylonian exile.

The relationship between God and people in the Old Testament was certainly dynamic, and like all marriages, some chapters they would like to remember and a few chapters they’d rather forget!

In the New Testament this same God makes promises, not unlike marriage vows, promises to be there, promises to forgive, and promises to love... For richer and poorer, in sickness and in health...

In the gospel of John we hear Jesus say, “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” It’s all this language of union and togetherness. The writer of Hebrews specifically uses language of the bride and bridegroom, when referring directly to the Son and the church.

The metaphor of marriage to describe God’s relationship to humanity is everywhere.

When Jesus is asked about divorce, there is a lot at stake. Not only that divorce in Jesus’ time created victims, but that the metaphor of marriage between God and Humanity was at stake.

And this leads us to the good news today... Through our baptism, God has chosen us and made promises to us. And these promises are rock solid. God will never divorce us. As much as we are untrustworthy, God is not. His promises are sure.

No matter what we go through, God is always right next to us, holding our hand, loving us...
Laughing with us; crying with us...

As we take communion in a little while, God will be intensely present, “This is my body given for you, This is my blood shed for you.” God’s greatest desire is to be close to you, and as close to you as you are to yourself. Amen...