

Genesis 2:18-24

Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' So 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 each living creature, that was its name. The 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. So 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. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then 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.'

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

Mark 10:2-16

²Some Pharisees came, and to test him 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.

Broken Fixers

I have a great deal of respect for anyone who speak more than one language as I am only proficient in the English language. I say this as a preface to the following story. I taught English as a Second Language in South Korea, and one of my students was a 76-year-old doctor, retired of course, but with a very sharp mind and always interested in learning. "John" and I became good friends and even worked out together at the Olympic pool at Olympic Park in Seoul. And John was always interested in learning more about the English language; it fascinated him. One aspect of the language that he particularly liked was idioms, expressions whose meaning is not clear from the individual words, but English speakers can easily deduce, like "chasing your tail" or "separating the sheep from the goats" (to use a biblical example).

John would come up to me from time to time and surprise me with a new idiom that he learned, and once he came up to me and said, "I wear my pants in the house." I had to puzzle over this one, and it soon occurred to me that he meant to say, "I wear the pants in my house." Oh how little changes in sentence structure can alter the meaning considerably, especially with regard to idioms.

There's an idiom that is very appropriate for today's Gospel lesson, and that's the one about the 500 pound gorilla in the room (if I said that to John, he might have been startled). But we know that the 500 pound gorilla in this room is *divorce*. I suppose I could bypass the whole issue by focusing on verses 13 and following, all the nice stuff about blessing the children and how Jesus loves us and how should welcome the Kingdom of God as we welcome children, but I think I've already done that. Time to face the 500 pound gorilla and, to use another idiom, *clear the air*.

Divorce is a touchy issue in the church, which is why it's so often avoided. I know people who have left churches because of the issue, and I know people who are plagued with guilt over the issue. So let me make things as clear as I can; God does not love anyone any less because their marriage ends in divorce. Furthermore, it is *never* God's will that anyone suffer physical or psychological abuse in a marriage. As a pastor I sometimes condone divorce because I believe it to be the most compassionate thing to do in some circumstances. So what are we to make of Jesus' words, that whoever divorces and remarries commits adultery? Are we to say that once divorced you should not remarry? Let's examine this.

First of all note that the Pharisees who come to visit Jesus aren't really interested in *learning* anything from Jesus. They're not coming to him to gain some wisdom; they're coming to *test* him. On the issue of divorce there were two opposing views in Jesus' day, and both had to do with the definition of "indecency," and, as you might guess, both were focused upon the reason a man should divorce his wife, not the other way around. Women were considered property that a man could dispose of for the right reasons, and what was indecency was something debated among men. The "liberal" school said burning the hummus was indecent, and the conservative school said *adultery* is the only indecent act. The Pharisees ask Jesus to give his opinion because either way he goes he will lose credit among either conservatives or the liberals.

But the approach Jesus takes is not what the Pharisees expected: First he asks, "What did Moses say?" and the Pharisees say, "Well Moses said a man could present a certificate to his wife and be done with her." And rather than argue over what is "indecent," Jesus lights into the Pharisees, saying, "It's because of *your* hardness of heart that Moses permitted divorce. God's initial plan for man and woman never included divorce; the bond between man and woman was sacred and eternal, and whatever is truly brought together by God cannot be dissolved by man or woman. The two become one, and never become two again. If humans break that divine bond, any other union is adultery.

Divorce is a tragedy, but in a much broader sense, anything that goes against God's perfect plan for this world is a tragedy. Broken families are a tragedy. A lake that no longer supports life is a tragedy. Injustice is a tragedy. Poverty and hunger in a world where there is enough is a tragedy. **Anything** that blemishes God's good creation is a tragedy. And there is plenty of tragedy for us to witness, and as long as we love those whose lives are affected by tragedy, those tragedies become ours as well.

Some people get so discouraged by the tragedies that are so prevalent that they withdraw and give up on the world, as they give up on those around them. Thank God that God doesn't. Jesus doesn't. It's interesting that in the Gospel of Mark Jesus get's a bit testy, "You sinful and adulterous generation," he says. "How long must I put up with you?" But thank goodness that he does put up with us. And the reason that he "puts up" with us is that he loves us; the reason he get's so frustrated with us is because he loves us. He gets frustrated with us the way we get frustrated with our children when we know they can do better but they choose not to.

So when the Pharisees ask Jesus, "How should a broken humanity deal with divorce?" Jesus says, "It was never God's intention that you be broken." It's significant that he take such a strong stance against

divorce, because the gender that will benefit most from prohibiting divorce in that context would be the woman, who would have to resort to begging if dismissed by her husband for any indecency.

My brothers and sisters, we live in a very imperfect world, but we can't compromise righteousness. Divorce is a tragedy, even when it's necessary. But we should never lose sight of God's perfect plan for this world, and we, as disciples of Jesus, as imperfect as we are, should always strive to restore the perfect relationship between God and humanity, which means we also strive to restore the relationships between one person and another, relationships centered in love.