

So What About Divorce?

There are few things more beautiful in this life than seeing a pair of elderly folks tenderly holding hands as they walk down the street together, a testament to years of love and forgiveness and friendship.

Here in our own midst, we have folks like Jerry and Millie Goo and Arleen and Larry Young and many others, who, at least from the outside looking in, seem to have found that sweet spot of love and affection that has given them many happy years together.

We are also a community of those who have never married, or those who have married and divorced — and for all of us here today, the question becomes, how are we to understand what Jesus is getting at today?

What does this really hard teaching ask us to look at?

What changes does it challenge us to make?

My grandmother was married to a man who became an abusive alcoholic.

When my Mom was 12, her parents were divorced, and because my grandmother belonged to a denomination that cut people off from the sacraments after a divorce, my grandmother lived nearly the rest of her life believing, in her heart of hearts, that she was damned.

It was the kindness of a local priest who came to visit her in her hospital bed where she lay dying of lung cancer who finally placed a dressing on what had been a wound — open for a lifetime.

He gave her absolution and holy communion; allowing her to die in peace.

Perhaps you know a similar story; perhaps you have lived a similar story.

The pain of these stories is that the church has, in my humble opinion, badly misread the lesson given to us today.

For too many years, we have read this lesson as a law in the shape of a newly sharpened knife – a knife that cuts those already wounded by divorce.

It's time to look again at today's gospel lesson.

As you know, context is key, and far too often, preachers and teachers have failed to take seriously exactly what's going on today.

Today, Jesus isn't confronted with someone who's getting divorced or one who's living in a difficult marriage.

And that really is the key here.

We know how Jesus responds to the Samaritan woman who's been married five times and is now living with number six.

He doesn't call her an adulteress – he offers her the living water of eternal life.

We know about the woman caught in the very act of adultery, cringing and crying on the dirty street, surrounded by men holding stones just waiting to bash her head in; as Jesus looks the men in the eye and invites the one with no sin to start the execution – which no one does, because no one can – and Jesus takes the woman by the hand and helps her to her feet:

“Has anyone condemned you?”

“No one, sir.”

“Then nor do I ...”

This is Jesus when he is face to face with those who are in the midst of messes, messes like divorce.

But that's not what's happening today.

Today, the legal eagles are at it again, the same guys who come to ask trick questions like:

"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" and "whose wife is she in heaven if she's widowed seven times?"

And now today:

"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

These guys aren't looking for wisdom, they're looking to set a trap.

Remember, just a few weeks ago, Herod cuts off John's head because John objects to Herod divorcing wife number one so he can marry his niece.

Maybe Jesus will put his own head on the block with his answer, these legalists are thinking.

It's in that context that we need to hear what Jesus has to say.

And once again, Jesus turns the tables on those who think they stand justified before God because in their own eyes they have followed the rules, have paid their dues and therefore have the right to say to God:

"You owe me!"

And once again, Jesus says: "That's not how it works."

They ask about divorce, and Jesus speaks of marriage.

They ask about the letter of the law, and Jesus reflects on God's dream for us.

They ask about temporary things, but Jesus points to the eternal.

He responds to the question designed to trap by insisting that just as God intends for us to love our enemies, to forgive endlessly, to sell all we have and give it to the poor, to take up our cross and follow him, to feed the poor and visit the prisoner, to wash each others feet, just so, God intends that married couples become one flesh.

Are we always faithful in forgiving our enemies?

Do we forgive endlessly?

Have we sold all we have, giving it to the poor?

How often do we in fact pick up our cross or feed the poor or visit the prisoner or wash each other's feet?

No, we fail at these things quite regularly.

And, very often, we fail also at marriage.

And when that failure occurs, Jesus is not standing over us ready to throw rocks at our heads.

He is the one who bends down, takes us by the hand, and says:

"Get up, your sins are forgiven, try again."

What Jesus keeps insisting upon is that our relationship with God is not based on a bargain:

“I follow the rules and you reward me God;” an attitude that leads to a lifetime of looking for loopholes and twisting words and scheming designs.

Our relationship with God is like the kind of marriage that God intends for us from the very beginning.

It is a relationship founded on mutual trust, mutual admiration and mutual respect.

It is a relationship that grows in the midst of conflict, of disappointment and pain; becoming something completely new, something unpredicted, even profound.

A fellow tells the story of his wife who decides she will start learning how to make a Hawaiian quilt.

She’s never made a quilt before, so before she begins, she draws out what she expects it to look like when she is done.

The sides match up evenly and the colors are coordinated and in good taste.

Then she begins.

As days turn to weeks and weeks to months, the quilt grows as a patchwork of colors and designs; never quite even at the sides, with a squiggly line of red here, a bright yellow piece there.

After nearly a year of sewing and mistakes and mid-course corrections, the quilt is complete.

It looks nothing like the original drawing; but it has instead a depth of color and strength of character that she never imagined.

While no one would mistake it for one professionally sewn, it hangs on her wall, reminding her of the 40 years she has lived with her spouse, in a marriage that, like the quilt, began with plans and dreams, only to become something different, yet far deeper than those early dreams thought possible. Garland, *New Application Commentary*, 389, paraphrased.

And there is this.

Today's gospel doesn't end with Jesus discussing marriage and divorce; it ends with a gentle coaxing toward the way life can be lived so that successful relationships are possible.

It ends with Jesus welcoming little children and blessing them: telling us that if we wish to have eyes to see heaven's gate – in this life and in the next – we need to become like these young ones, who stand in complete need, who receive with joy, who expect nothing, and who therefore have hearts that are open, eyes that can see, ears that can hear, the gentle whisper of the God who holds us close, in our failures and in our triumphs.

We are all the beloved children of God: married and divorced, sinners and saints!

And what can we say but "Thanks be to God!"

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