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For the Love...
Mark 10:2-16

The session voted to allow non-member weddings in our sanctuary about three and a half years ago, when marriage equality came to Alabama. We wanted to be sure that every couple who wants to be married in a church could be, no matter what, whether they are members of our church or not. Non-member weddings are also an additional source of income, albeit a small one. Whoever is married in our sanctuary or anywhere else by Catherine or me goes through some form of pre-marital counseling, and the reason is simple – we take marriage seriously. We had someone call the church one morning last week and ask if they could come be married that afternoon. I’m sure that there are, occasionally, reasons why someone might need to tie the knot quickly, but to steal a line from the marriage ceremony – Marriage is a commitment not to be entered into thoughtlessly or carelessly, but with great intention and care.

Presbyterian minister Mary Jane Cornell remembers her father, also a Presbyterian pastor, preparing for many weddings he officiated when she was a child. He would pace around their living room reciting the words for the ceremony, committing them to memory so he could officiate without notes. Having heard it so many times, she knew the ceremony by heart, too – but it wasn’t until much later that she realized that the couple didn’t vow to love each other “in sickness and in hell...” but in sickness and in health.¹

Although some marriages turn out that way, don’t they. Despite the couple’s best intentions, or the love they felt at one time or another, despite counseling or creativity or whatever else they may try, some marriages end. They do. It isn’t easy, it’s most often not a decision made lightly or easily, but sometimes, divorce is what’s best for everybody. And reading this text makes me think – for the love, Jesus, why did you say that? Life is hard! People change! They make mistakes, they fall out of love, they love the wrong people in the first place! No divorce? No remarriage? I’d wager to guess that no one chooses to go through a divorce unless it’s the best or only option for them.

It’s hard not to read this text through our 21st century lenses. In 2018, marriage is an equal or at least an aspirationally equal partnership. Marriage has evolved over the past century or more into an institution built, ideally, on love and mutual respect. Over the past twenty or thirty years, it’s evolved into a partnership possible for two people who love each other, who wish to be legally bound to one another regardless of their sex or gender identity, thanks be to God.

¹ Mary Jane Cornell, “Mark 10:2-16 Pastoral perspective,” *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B, Volume 4. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2009.

So peering into the text from 2018, from this distance, with our postmodern view of marriage... some people get the wrong idea. See, this Bible looks like a book doesn't it? But some people, when they read passages like this one, they want to use it like a weapon. They want to use this sacred book like a weapon to harm people who have already survived the pain of divorce. Or they want to use it like a chain to keep someone in a loveless marriage, or even – God forbid – in an abusive one.

But the Bible is not a weapon. It's a book, and we must read it in light of its historical context. The context that gave rise to this exchange was very different from our own. In Biblical times, men and women didn't enter into marriage as equals. Marriage was primarily an arrangement between two men – women and children were considered property, with few rights of their own.

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” The Pharisees who ask this question of Jesus are trying to test him. It's similar to Shannon's favorite story of a Jesus trap – a woman successively marries seven brothers... on the day of resurrection, whose wife will she be? Jesus won't be trapped by their legalistic arguments, though. He's less interested in what's permitted, and more interested in what God has commanded. He turns their question on its head by talking not of divorce but of marriage and human relationships.

By looking back to the creation story in Genesis, Jesus uplifts the idea that humans are created to be in loving relationships with one another. After all – God exists in relationship: Father – Son – and Spirit. Creator – Redeemer – Sustainer, in an eternal dance with one another. Relationships are one way we come to know and understand God, by seeing God's image in one another; by sharing and receiving unconditional love. As one person put it, “Marriage is one of the best laboratories to learn the hard work of self-giving love.”² But not just marriage. Marriage certainly is a central and defining relationship for many people, but it isn't for everyone. Friendships – self-selected family – or siblings and parents – the people who know us well and remind us even when we're at our worst that we are loved – are gifts from the Creator who loves us. The point here, I think is that relationships are to be treasured. Taken seriously. Invested in. Especially when those relationships are bound by marriage vows.

So, what did Jews at that time believe about divorce? In Mosaic law, a husband could divorce his wife, but a wife did not have the right to divorce her husband. A man could decide to divorce his wife on no grounds at all, leaving her destitute, with no way to earn an income, and no hope of remarrying. So then, by referring to a woman divorcing her husband, Jesus gives the woman more power than most rabbis would've at that time. By opposing divorce, Jesus is seeking to protect the vulnerable – women and children who would be put out on the street by the practice. Time and again, Jesus aligns himself with those on the margins of society – protecting, and believing women, and welcoming children with open arms.

² Lose, David, “Dear Working Preacher...” column on Working Preacher.com.

The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded this week. The prize will be split by two people – A Congolese doctor and a young Iranian woman. Both have been outspoken advocates for women. In different ways, both have led campaigns to end sexual violence as a tool of war.

The doctor, Dr. Denis Mukwege, is a gynecologist in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Congo is the most dangerous place in the world to be a woman. In the epicenter of what Eve Ensler called a femicide – “a systematic campaign to destroy women,” Dr. Mukwege does the work of healing.³ The doctor founded Panzi Hospital, one of the few places women can receive medical care in Eastern Congo. He performs lifesaving operations on women who have survived extreme violence, and created a model of care that restores dignity and seeks justice. At great personal risk, he has become a champion for the hundreds of thousands of abused women in Congo – taking on the rebels for their inhumanity, and the government for its indifference.⁴ He says, “I identify every woman raped with my own wife. Every mother ... with my mother. Every child ... with my own children. How can we remain silent?”⁵

Nadhia Murad is a 25 year-old woman who belongs to a religious minority targeted by the Islamic State. When militants attacked her town in northern Iraq, committing unspeakable atrocities, she was taken into slavery for three years. She wrote a memoir called *The Last Girl* because she wants to be the last girl who has to experience the horrors she has survived. She says, “I am prepared to repeat my story, as long as it helps to achieve justice and to support genocide survivors... connection to other [survivors] empowers us to take back our lives and to fight for our community’s future.”⁶

This World Communion Sunday, we share the sacrament along with our brothers and sisters in Christ around the globe. Bread will be broken this day in beautiful sanctuaries, in simple chapels, on hillsides, in hospitals, where people are well-fed and where many go hungry. And the challenge, God’s call and commandment, is for us to love one another. To love despite and across the differences that divide us. To protect the vulnerable. Not to look away or to ignore the millions of our sisters and brothers who have survived the absolute worst, but to listen and to learn their stories, and to raise our voices alongside theirs. To cry out for justice. For peace. For love.

We don’t have to look halfway around the globe to find vulnerable women and children. A short walk outside to those who have found refuge at our turquoise table, or down the

³ Gettleman, Jeffery, “Rape Victims’ Words Help Jolt Congo into Change,” New York Times, 10/17/08.

⁴ Gettleman, Jeffery, “Denis Mukwege: A Sense of Calm Amid the Grinding Work of Saving Lives” New York Times, Oct 5, 2018.

⁵ Mukwege, Denis, quoted in trailer for “The Man Who Mends Women: The Wrath of Hippocrates.”

⁶ Murad, Nadhia, “Outraged by the Attacks on Yazidis? It’s Time To Help.” New York Times, February 10, 2018.

street to First Light or the YWCA and we'll find women and children who have their own stories of survival to tell. Maybe some of you, do, too.

What I hear God saying to us through this text is that the kingdom of heaven belongs to ones such as these. As Christians, we are to be in the business of making the world safe for those who are most vulnerable. By hearing their stories. By lending our voice and our vote to support policies that include and welcome rather than exclude and condemn. By choosing love, and affirming that love is love is love is love.

Too many faithful people use the Bible as a weapon to harm those already struggling. Plenty consider it an outdated relic that should be resigned to a shelf. But I hope we can see it as a living document, that can guide us into authentic relationship with each other and with God. A tool that helps us open our arms to receive our neighbors, and inspires us to treasure our closest relationships through self-giving love.