

Job 1:1, 2:1-10;  
Psalm 26;  
Heb 1:1-4, 2:5-12,  
Mark 10:2-16

“Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked,  
‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’”

In the Name of the One Holy and Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Good Morning!

I would like to read to you a piece of an email that was sent by Mother Sheelah to the Sunday school teachers and the vestry. She provides a great introduction into this week’s sermon. “This week’s Gospel is all about marriage, divorce and adultery. Which is why I have delegated it to Deacon Cathy! Joking apart – Deacon Cathy is our liaison for Domestic violence and was keen to preach this month which is Domestic Violence awareness month. This week’s Gospel appeared the best to fit with that topic especially in light of the Episcopal Church’s view of marriage. Which is, that when a marriage is “*imperiled by dissension...it shall be the duty of the Clergy [if consulted] to act first to protect and promote the physical and emotional safety of those involved and only then, if it be possible, to labor that the parties be reconciled.*” [Canon 1:19:sec 1, parentheses are mine. ]Our Church’s view is that marriage is a sacred relationship that is broken when fear and violence take the place of love and respect. Our human relationships as Christians need to be about love. Deacon Cathy brings us face to face with the ugly fact that life is not always like that. Our love, St Barnabas, is manifest in what we do to help these broken families start over again.”

Sins come and sins go. What once was forbidden becomes socially and culturally acceptable. Such is the fate of divorce. The Pharisees, who appear as the most important religious group in Mark’s Gospel, are seeking to trap Jesus by asking Him about the legality of divorce. Notice that they do not ask Him about the morality of divorce. Moralizing the meaning of sins does not happen for another 1,500 years. They want to know what must happen to make the dissolution of marriage acceptable. But Jesus refuses to be forced into a senseless argument and reframes the issue from one of legality to one of communal integrity. Jesus reminds the Pharisees that marriage is not a legal contract, but a spiritual covenant – where two individual lives are made one by God’s divine blessing. Divorce is not a sin in terms of being a wrong act. Divorce happens as a result of the condition of sin, where broken people live broken lives in a broken world. Divorce is not evil; so much as it is unfortunate and injurious. Divorce is simply more evidence that we are not perfect and desperately need God’s healing grace.

Today we will look at marriage, divorce and domestic violence. The subject is what our scriptures say about traditional marriage: where it comes from and where within the Christian understanding, it is acceptable for a marriage to come to an end, and the role that domestic violence plays.

Marriage is one of the institutions that have been hit particularly hard by the cultural changes in today’s society. I am very aware that many people are not currently married, have not been married, and have no intention of being married in the traditional sense described in today’s gospel. Marriage is not the norm that every person ought to follow. There are other,

equally valid ways of being in the world. I am focusing on this topic today because marriage is an institution that is important to the human family, of which we are all members.

According to Genesis, God's first concern for the newly minted creation was the isolated state of the most prominent member of creation, and that would be the human creature. God's first attempt at a solution for that problem came in the form of the creation of animals and birds, which the human creature was given the privilege of naming. One Biblical scholar has noted that the only pronouncement of "Not Good" in the entire creation story was God's evaluation of human loneliness. First, God created animals and birds, but they did not completely fill that innate human need for partnership, for relatedness. As cute as puppies and pandas and parakeets are, they did not do the job, so God created another human being. The intimate covenantal relationship between man and woman was one of the original good things, like air, light, water and everything else the universe and its creatures need for survival and joyful living.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is understood that "the marriage union, the sexual union, should create a life-long bond of fidelity." Will you be faithful to him only? Will you be faithful to her only, as long as you both shall live? That is the question that is asked and not a single person has ever said, "No, I won't," but I imagine that more than a few have failed to keep the promise they made with best intentions on their wedding day.

An old issue of Psychology Today reports that one-half of all married people cheat on their spouses. It may comfort you to know that according to this article, 84% of those who cheat feel guilty about it.

Marriages were arranged in the communities out of which the scriptures emerged. The notion that marriage and love are connected happened much later. The reasons for marriage were ordinarily procreation or the solidification of property. Nevertheless, fidelity has always mattered. When fidelity is not present, commitment is compromised, and trust is broken. Infidelity is not limited to sexual infidelity. We can make a mistress or lover out of our work, or out of our addictions. Infidelity can take many forms, and few married people can always manage every day to be faithful in both the letter and the spirit of the law of love.

But infidelity is not the only reason for divorce. God did not create us to live in fear, in betrayal, hostility or abuse, and violence, but we act counter to God's will all the time. If we did not, we would have no need of saving, and remember Jesus' very name means "God Saves." That is the why of His life and resurrection in our world. It is our hardness of heart that takes us down the road that can end up strangling the life out of something – our marriage, our relationship with our children, a friendship.

But we are curious creatures – we often believe our hardness of heart to be something other than what it is. We will go to considerable lengths to convince ourselves and others of our own righteousness in the face of significant evidence to the contrary. We sometimes conceal the truth about ourselves from ourselves. This is why domestic violence has been silenced for far too long.

Domestic violence can be described as a pattern of coercive behavior characterized by the domination and control of one person over another, usually an intimate partner, through physical, psychological, emotional, verbal, sexual, and/or economic abuse. It is an epidemic affecting individuals in every community, regardless of age, economic status, race, religion, nationality or educational background. Violence is often accompanied by emotionally abusive and controlling behavior, and thus is part of a systematic pattern of dominance and control. Domestic violence

results in physical injury, psychological trauma, and sometimes death. The consequences of domestic violence can cross generations and last a lifetime.

Do you know some of the heart breaking facts of domestic violence? Let us take a look at some of them.

- An estimated 1.3 million women are victims of physical assault by an intimate partner each year.
- 85% of domestic violence victims are women.
- Approximately four women are murdered everyday due to domestic violence; totaling 1,500 every year.
- Women who leave their batterers are at a 75% greater risk of being killed by the batterer than those who stay.
- 50% of homeless women and children are fleeing from domestic violence.
- Witnessing violence between one's parents or caretakers is the strongest risk factor of transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next.
- Boys who witness domestic violence are twice as likely to abuse their own partners and children when they become adults.
- 30% to 60% of perpetrators of intimate partner violence also abuse children in the household
- There are three times as many shelters in this country for animals as there are for battered women and their children.
- Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women – more than automobiles accidents, rape, and muggings.

I could continue this list, but I think you get the picture. It is up to us to foster the passion and compassion to become advocates for the many silenced women who live in the prison of abuse. I began my diaconal ministry working in the area of domestic violence in 2002 with the Domestic Violence Awareness Coalition in New Brunswick. When the New Brunswick police department agreed to have a Domestic Violence Response Team (DVRT) of volunteers, I was in the first class of individuals trained six years ago and I continue to serve on the DVRT. I feel honored to be associated with a church that is actively advocating for the victim. I was impressed with the work that you, the members of St. Barnabas do to help settle victims into new living quarters. Your compassion in this field is one of the reasons that led me to this church.

The spirits of those beaten down by domestic violence can be lifted by the steadfast reassurance that God has better and kinder things in store for them than they have experienced. The abused can find comfort and the courage to heal, and the abusers can develop the honesty to address their behavior, be forgiven, and learn to live without turning to violence. When I respond to a domestic violence case, I try to guide the victim toward resources that are needed for healing and wholeness. I meet the person at his or her worst and offer peace, compassion, integrity, and respect that God wills for all of us and that we have been directed to give to each other.

So, is it wrong to divorce? Yes, but not for many of the reasons we have explored today. Divorce happens to imperfect people – in other words, all of us. It is difficult to imagine anyone

living in the world today whose life has not been touched by divorce. All of us are broken, all have sinned, and all of us stand in need of God's loving grace and forgiveness. No one enters into the sacred covenant of marriage expecting it to end with divorce. No couple creates a family with the hope that one day circumstances will conspire to destroy it. When it happens, it is not an occasion for judgment and condemnation – further violence and shame offer no hope for redemption. Divorce is tragic, but it need not be the end of the world. Grace, love, forgiveness, mercy, compassion, kindness, and a host of other fair and just practices can transform the tragic into the hopeful and holy.

When people confess their failings and sins before Jesus, He says to them, "Get up, get going, and sin no more. I make it possible for you to move into a new way of being. Forgive yourself, as I have forgiven you." Restoration, not retribution, is always the goal in the kingdom of God.

In the world that Christ makes possible and that we are moving toward, there will be no more brokenness or pain, for the former things will have passed away. In the meantime, divorce is not ideal; it is not the goal, but sometimes it is the only viable choice for life and wholeness. Would I tell you that Jesus would not want you, if you were divorced, to remarry as this passage seems to indicate? I would say that Jesus would want all of us to move on toward restoration in our lives whatever form that restoration takes.

So what would Jesus say to the church that has failed to open wide the door of His healing grace, the church that so often fails to offer acceptance and invitation of a new life? I think He would say to all of us, whenever we judge or reject, "You can do a lot better than that." St. Barnabas is truly blessed as being one of the most open and accepting churches that I have seen. But during this time of transition, there may be individuals staying away from church because they fear lack of acceptance, and that is an indictment on the brokenness of the church. We must reach out to everyone and let them know that this is a place where all of us receive healing, forgiveness, and hear the great news that beyond the worst that life can do to us, God offers a new beginning. The church is charged with inviting back home all of those who feel exiled. In church, we must remember to minister to one another, because we all have shortcomings to be admitted and shared. None of us is a bit better than any of the rest of us. What we are about here in the church is restoring relationships. We are in the resurrection business. Resurrection is not an event that happened way back there in the past or way out there in the future, "it is the power of a new being, life being created out of death, here and now."

In the beginning, God said, "it is not good for that human creature I have made to be alone." And because God is good, God gave us one another. Figuring out how to be connected to one another in love and mutuality – that is the challenge in every age.

I would like to close with the words of Ernest Hemingway, in A Farewell to Arms. "The world breaks everyone, and afterwards, many are made strong in the broken places."

May it be so for each of you, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

**The Rev. Cathy E. Brunson, Deacon**

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