

October 4, 2015 19th Sunday after Pentecost Lectionary 27

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Genesis 2:18-24, Psalm 8

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12, Mark 10:2-16

Ideas from: David Lose.net dated 9-28-15, David Lose in Working Preacher dated 10-1-12,
Karoline Lewis on Working Preacher dated 9-27-15, Barbara Lundblad 9-28-15.

Let us pray:

Grace and Peace to you, Beloved of Christ, from our merciful Savior and redeemer. Amen.

So imagine the wedding as today's reading from Genesis' second creation story might have it:

Zach is at the organ playing something beautiful and processional-like.

The wedding attendants have made their way up the aisle and they've found their spots here on the sides.

The bride comes in and stands here in the front, all by herself.

And then the music changes and here comes the groom.

His mom and his dad have latched elbows with him, one on either side, walking him down the aisle.

They get to the front and he hugs them both, he literally leaves his father and his mother, and he clings (oh, that's a strong image), he clings to his wife.

That's the scene: This man clinging to his wife, and as Genesis reads, they become one flesh.

Not quite our typical wedding image, is it?!

Oh, we hear a lot about "traditional marriage".

I suppose this is one image of what that could look like. I mean, come on, it's in the bible!

But it's not exactly what we're used to hearing or seeing, or expecting, is it?

Genesis offers this scenario, but marriage in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, was quite often replete with multiple wives, concubines, and the opportunity to take another wife if children weren't forthcoming. Talk with Abraham, or Jacob (or maybe I should say, talk with Sarah, with Rachel). Talk with David, with Solomon—that's precisely what marriage looked like for them. That's just how it was.

Our scripture passages this morning, especially Mark's gospel and Genesis, are weighty, painful.

They bring with them a host of emotions for many of us who know divorce in some way, and the pain that broken relationships and broken promises inherently hold.

Grief, sadness, shame, embarrassment, resentment, anger, jealousy, relief, you can add your own here.

For many of us, these passages don't offer true space for new life or the healing that time might bring.

They don't capture the complexity that we know to be our experience and the experience of those we love.

These are hard, challenging passages, and they've been used all too often to batter and beat down.

All that and I hear these texts, with their one man, one woman-type refrains, as a woman who loves another woman, and I'm left wondering the place and message for me, or for those who identify as trans or queer, and for so many of us who simply don't fit into neat little boxes—thanks be to God.

So, I invite you to take a deep breath—we need it.

What is the message in Mark's gospel for us, for our time?

To get there, let's look more closely at the Gospel, and for a moment I'll do this more like a Bible study, because I feel so strongly about digging into the heart of this painful text.

I'm grateful to David Lose and others for this background:

First, divorce in the 1st century is far different than divorce in this century.

In that time, there were two different schools of thought about when a husband could divorce his wife.

The stricter one allowed for divorce if the woman had been unfaithful.

The more lenient one made space for divorce simply because the man was displeased for whatever reason.

For instance, a rabbinical source mentions the crime of burning the morning toast!

And, in that time, the consequences of divorce for a woman were disastrous.

In public and in her own family, she'd be shunned, she'd lack economic support, and there's little she could do to care for herself or her kids.

We hear this reading as judgment, and even condemnation; to Jesus' hearers it was protection for women.

Women in that land, in that time, in the eyes of the law, were incredibly vulnerable, so when Jesus counsels against divorce, this is counsel to help women avoid this devastating vulnerability.

Secondly, when Jesus talks about adultery, he names it as adultery against her, against the woman.

That's a big change—a big step—from those of his time.

For them, a man's adultery was said to be against the woman's father, or her family, since they were the ones who entrusted the woman, a property, in a sense, to him.

Jesus names the vulnerability that women in his time experienced.

He humanizes them, he humanizes us.

Location always matters in Mark's Gospel.

By this 10th chapter of Mark, Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, on the way to his own death.

Today he's beyond the Jordan River, physically beyond the border, the boundaries, beyond the familiar.

I wonder if Mark and Jesus are making a statement about crossing the physical boundaries, but also the social boundaries, too.

Though we might not realize it, Jesus words here are progressive—strangely progressive—for their time.

They challenge the status quo as his community would have known, they protect the vulnerable.

And doing so, they nudge his community, and us, to remember that in marriage we are inter-dependent.

I offer this most simply as background, for it helps me at least to understand the culture into which Jesus was speaking.

All that, and as your pastor, as your new pastor, I still struggle, mightily with this text.

Let me also speak today to a few things I notice.

None of this is novel, but it is important to hear in this setting and from the pulpit.

I notice the pain and brokenness that divorce brings.

What's important though, is that in most cases, that pain isn't new, it isn't like the moment divorce is mentioned the pain starts... most often, pain has been there in all its complications for a time, often a long, long time, for many years, and divorce is simply a new name for which to associate that pain.

I notice in a majority of the conversations I have with you, relationships and often broken relationship and even divorce are part of what we share: sometimes it's a past experience and you share how you've come through it, or the extra energy and attention you're using to share parenting.

Sometimes it's sadness or grief for an adult child or grandchild going through divorce.

Sometimes it's a young person talking about their experience in a family where divorce is real.

Sometimes it's the broken, messy reality of human relationships when they are fulfilling, or not so much.

Sometimes it's the mental health and addiction struggles that are real in our relationships.

And, sometimes it's the new life and the second chance of remarriage, a gift of grace when we'd wondered if we'd ever love again.

What I notice the most is how God is present in these situations, and how community at our very best can embody God's love and make a space for all this real-ness.

We can be a place where the complexity, the difficulty, of love and partnership are talked about, prayed for, and held.

We can be a place where support is offered and found.

We can be a place where we hold up faithfulness, and what "God has joined", as much as possible,

And at the same time a place where we can offer to one another Christ's grace—truly grace—when divorce and separation are finally the best solution.

We can be a place that practices death and resurrection, core to our very being.

We can be a place with space enough for all sorts of relationships—marriage and partnership, yes, but also for the calling of deep friendships, for strong family ties, for singleness, for dating, and for companionship, and finally for creatures—blessed animals—who are truly part of our family.

Today we remember St. Francis of Assisi, he died around this time in the year 1226.

He was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant; a merchant who expected him to follow in his ways.

In a vision his life turned and Francis renounced his wealth and inheritance and devoted himself to the poor.

Francis and the order he founded, the Franciscans, used that line of being “wedded to Lady Poverty.”

There are stories of Francis’ love of birds and animals, creatures he called his brothers, his sisters.

After worship today, we’ll bless animals, a tradition so often associated with Francis, and another way that we lift up those creatures who grace our lives and give meaning.

In all of this, at the end of our reading from Mark, Jesus welcomes and blesses the children, the vulnerable ones.

In our painful times and broken times, at our most vulnerable, this is the same welcome, the same blessing that Jesus offers to you, to me, no matter what: he loves you and me, and this world, like crazy.

Dear people of God, hear the good news for this day: you are beloved, you are enough, you are blessed. You are created for love.

Amen.