

*Pastor Jana Schofield*

*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA*

*Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*October 3, 2021*

*Genesis 2:18-24; Ps. 8; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16*

This gospel text is always a difficult text to preach on. And my guess is that for many of us, it is a difficult gospel text to hear.

A dear friend of mine was divorced a few years ago. Her spouse had an addiction to alcohol that undermined everything in their relationship. I remember my friend saying that her spouse's primary relationship wasn't with her, it was with alcohol. For her, divorce was the only way that she and her kids felt like they would survive. My friend is now very happily remarried. My friend is finally experiencing wholeness and life.

I hold up my friend's story, and the stories of many of you who have been divorced, next to this gospel text which has often been used in hurtful ways to condemn those who have been divorced and attack same-gender marriage. Throughout Christian history, there's a lot of damage this gospel, or rather, the *interpretation* of this gospel, has done.

I think here would be a good place to remember how *Lutherans* interpret scripture. I'll start with a question – and I truly do want you to shout out your answers: When you look at the cross, what message does it send you? What words come to mind? (grace, love, forgiveness, mercy). How Lutherans interpret scripture is that we hold up with more authority those scripture passages which lead us to the message of the cross. There's a whole lot in scripture that doesn't lead us to grace, love, forgiveness, and mercy – like don't drink milk with your meat in Deuteronomy or women shouldn't speak in church in I Corinthians, and perhaps even this gospel text from Mark.

As Lutherans, we do not use Bible bullets—we do not pull out individual scripture passages and hurl them at people to say “You're wrong, you're bad, you're going to hell,” but we do look at the meta-message of scripture about God's grace love, mercy and forgiveness and how we reflect and usher in grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness in the world.

We also never read scripture without remembering its historical and literary context. In regard to this passage on divorce, remember at the time there was no social construct of marriage beyond that of one man and one woman, and only men could divorce women because women were considered property, first of their fathers and then of their husbands.

In the book of Deuteronomy it says that husbands could write a certificate of divorce if they found something that displeased them or was “objectionable” about their wives. Wives could literally be divorced for any reason and kicked to the curb. Wives had no rights to divorce their husbands, and if they were handed a certificate of divorce, they needed to find another husband right away in order to survive, since being married was the only way women could find economic and social stability. And yet women were seen as adulterers if they had been previously married! In Deuteronomy it says that a divorced woman's first husband can't take her back if she's married someone else because she's been “defiled.”

It's significant, then, what Jesus says in the New Testament in the gospel of Mark. After being tested by the Pharisees about this Old Testament law of Moses, Jesus tells the disciples, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; *and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.*” It's significant because Jesus gives wives an equal place in marriage to their husbands. Both have the right to divorce, and it's not only the woman who is responsible for committing adultery as in Old Testament times, but her husband does the same if he divorces his wife and marries another.

If you look at this gospel text through the meta-message of scripture, Jesus is doing what Jesus does throughout the gospels: Jesus is protecting the vulnerable.

It's no accident that the gospel passage starts with Jesus' teachings on divorce and ends with Jesus laying his hands on children and blessing them. In every other place in the gospel of Mark whenever Jesus lays hands on anyone, it is to heal the sick and the vulnerable. Children were the most vulnerable in ancient societies, but it's likely that these children who were being brought to Jesus were especially vulnerable. Perhaps they were sick. Perhaps they were poor. And perhaps, given what Jesus had just been talking about, these were the children of parents who had been divorced.

And what did Jesus do? He insisted that others let the children come to him. He took them in his arms and laid his hands on them and blessed them. And he said, "...it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

If you are a child of divorce, the kingdom of God belongs to you. Jesus has utter compassion and grace and love for you. Whether your parents' divorce happened last year or last century, Jesus accompanies you in your pain, and embraces you with healing and new life.

And if you have been divorced, the meta-message of scripture says this: Jesus desires trust and equality in every relationship, and when those are lopsided, when trust and equality in a marriage are so deeply damaged, it is acceptable for the marriage to come to a legal end. In this way, Jesus is protecting most vulnerable in a marriage, like my friend who was divorced. And, like my friend, it is possible to experience resurrection after the death of a marriage. As our faith promises, new life always comes out of death.

But the most important meta-message of scripture is this: God will never divorce us. The all-encompassing love and mercy of God embraces us like Jesus embracing the children in this gospel. So may we receive that embrace like little children, for the kingdom of God truly is ours. Amen.