

It is Not Good for the Human to be Alone

Genesis 2:18-24, Mark 10:2-16

October 4, 2015

19th Sunday after Pentecost

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After his divorce, my brother-in-law found a Bible church where he felt at home. The contemporary Christian music touched his heart, the small group studies helped him make sense of what was going on in his life. He felt at home in this community. Then one day he made an appointment with his pastor. He had met a woman he wanted to marry. His pastor told him that this church did not permit divorced people to get married because Jesus said, “whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.” So, if my brother-in-law wanted to be a faithful and obedient follower of Jesus, he had to live the rest of his life alone.

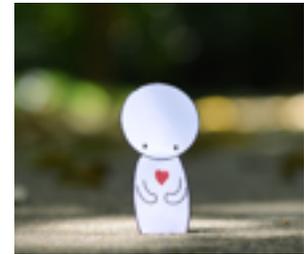
His fiancée was also divorced. She, too, was a devout Christian, a member of her church choir, etc. In her tradition, too, divorced people are expected to spend the rest of their lives alone. For her, remarriage without an annulment meant that she could not be married in her church, and that she would no longer be able to receive Holy Communion. She was okay with this, presuming that she would be able to commune with her new husband in his church. But that obviously wasn't going to happen.

In the end, they were married in a Lutheran church.

What we experienced in our own family, not so very long ago (2002) is the reality that different Christian groups interpret the same Bible in widely divergent ways. In the faith communities that my brother-in-law and sister-in-law were part of then, today's Gospel lesson was treated as law, as a commandment specifically for divorced persons. They experienced these words not just as law, but as judgment and condemnation. In the last five-six years, this Gospel text has taken on an additional role, being used by some groups to forbid and condemn same-gender marriage.

So we are left with a puzzle. Why, oh why does this Gospel lesson continue to appear in our church's lectionary? We not only welcome divorced persons, we celebrate and bless their subsequent marriages. We not only welcome LGBT persons, we celebrate and bless their marriages too. If we don't follow this teaching of Jesus, why do we even bother reading it in church? The simple answer is that we interpret it differently.

We understand God as going ahead of us, pulling us forward into a better future, into greater and greater love and joy and justice and equality and peace. Just as God's work in our world is not



finished, God's revelation is not yet complete. The same Holy Spirit who inspired, preserved and gathered the Scriptures is still present, speaking to us through these ancient texts, constantly communicating new things to us. Because of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, we look to the Scriptures to guide us, not to bind us. With Luther, we affirm that Christ is "no lawgiver, but a forgiver of sins and a savior," "a lover of those in trouble or anguish."¹ So we do not read this Scripture as a law or commandment aimed at certain segments of the population. We read it as good news, first and foremost, for Jesus' 1st century audience.

Jesus confronts and challenges a patriarchal culture in which, at best, women were regarded as second class, at worst as less than human — animated possessions that a man could acquire through marriage understood as the legal transfer of a woman's guardianship from one man to another. Some religious teachers insisted that a man could divorce his wife only if she was guilty of marital infidelity. Others argued that a man could divorce his wife, if she displeased him in any way. Women could not sue for divorce, and were almost completely powerless in the situation. A divorced woman lost her home, her children, her social status, the respect of the community, the protection of family and friends, and was left having to choose between begging, selling herself, or starving to death.

Jesus condemns the Pharisees, the leading Bible experts and religious teachers of his day, for the hardness of their hearts. They spend their time arguing whether a man can legally divorce his wife for burning the dinner. Their focus is on what a man can get away with and still be within the "law." Jesus reminds them that marriage is much more than a legal arrangement, it is a unique relationship in which a man and woman are joined together, in which two become united in faithful devotion to each other. Jesus turns this ancient culture and its laws on its head in two ways. (1) Jesus redefines adultery making it an offense a man commits against his own wife, thus getting rid of a double standard that allowed men to have relationships with multiple women. (2) Jesus suggests that women can divorce their husbands, thus granting women the same status and rights as their husbands.

We see Jesus meeting real people in a real place at a real time and challenging them to rethink their cultural and religious values. We see Jesus urging his audience to value marriage as a relationship of mutual faithfulness and devotion, to regard men and women as more equal, and to alleviate the horrible consequences of divorce for the women. Jesus' words were both a call to repentance for the religious teachers of his day, and good news for the vulnerable women of those ancient communities. Jesus' words remain a call to repentance for all who treat marriage as anything other than a relationship of mutual faithfulness and devotion, all who seek to deny human rights to others, and do nothing to alleviate the plight of the victims of broken marriages.

Jesus' words about divorce and remarriage may or may not be good news to men and women today. It is very possible that something that was a step forward at one place and time, can

¹ Martin Luther, *A Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1953, 1956, 1961) pp. 137, 147, 179.

become a step backward in another place and time. As we seek guidance in our time we look not only to this Gospel lesson but to other passages in the Bible.



Our Old Testament lesson for today is the very same text that Jesus quoted in his confrontation with the Pharisees. It is a text that reveals something essential to the flourishing of human beings. God says, “It is not good for the human to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). This is an important a-ha moment for God. After forming the first human from the earth, breathing the divine breath into its nostrils, planting a garden for this earthling to till and keep, God realizes that this human creature cannot flourish in isolation — it is not good for the human to be alone.

God sets out to create a helper and partner for the human by engaging in an experiment, forming from the earth animals and birds of every kind, and presenting them to the human who gives each creature a name. Some turn out to be useful for providing additional sources of food (eggs and milk), or hauling and carrying heavy loads (donkeys and oxen). Others are lovely to watch (butterflies), or make the human laugh (monkeys). Still others are cute and cuddly, and make loyal pets. But none of the animals is an equal partner for the human. So God puts the human to sleep and transforms it, kind of like in cellular mitosis: one is divided into two. God removes its “side” (not a rib) and creates a second human. The result is two humans, one of whom is female, the other male, who are capable of entering into relationships of partnership for mutual support and companionship.

God’s verdict is that it is not good for humans to be alone. God created humans for love, to be loved, to give love, and to live in loving relationships of mutuality, equality and partnership. Some of us get lucky early in life, meet the right person, and are blessed with marriages of thirty, forty, fifty, even sixty or more years. For some of us finding that right person is made difficult because of some physical, mental or emotional challenge. For some of us finding that right person is complicated by our race, our gender identity, our sexual orientation, or social status. Some of us commit ourselves to relationships that don’t work out, and we are left alone with hearts that are battered and bruised. Sometimes we find the courage to try again. Some of us are content to be single, finding living-giving companionship in relationships with pets, with friends and colleagues, and within communities of faith that nurture fellowship and friendship. Single or engaged, married or remarried, widowed or divorced — no one is meant to be alone, and no one is beyond the love of our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

