

Sermon for Pentecost XX-Year B 2018
Life Together --the Most Difficult Thing to Undertake

Several years ago, I attended a wedding of our friend's daughter. A justice of the peace presided over the ceremony and he began his wedding reflection by stating to the couple—
“Today you begin the most difficult thing
you will ever undertake . . . marriage is not easy.”

I remember thinking
that he cut to the chase fairly quickly by starting out this way. Here in America, marriage and family life present a strange paradox,
or so one commentator on today's text wrote
in the Christian Century Magazine.
We often wish that our families would function in an emotionally healthy way and look something like some version of an episode of *The Waltons* or,
if you're old enough, *Leave it to Beaver*.
And, yet, it is more typical even “normal”
for marriage or family life to be dysfunctional
and even somewhat fractured,
more like an episode of *Survival* or *Naked and Afraid*.

There is our *ideal* of family and
then there is the reality.
Today you begin the most difficult thing you will ever undertake—

And, yet, God says, it is not good that “the man”—
that is (in Hebrew) “*the one made of earth, dust and ashes*”
this one, created for life on earth,
it is *not good* for this one to be alone.
Please note that this is the first time in these creation stories that
God says that something is not *good*.
We mortal ones, made of earth, dust and ash,
are created for life together.

We were and are created for life together with *all* of creation—
with nature and with one another,
walking humbly with God.
Life together, to be in community,
is not one of the most difficult things we undertake,
it is *the* most difficult
and yet it is the most wonderful thing
we undertake because *it is life itself*.

Being married, being a family, sharing a life together,
is difficult not only because of times of adversity and change,
but because when we love someone, we become vulnerable—
In matters of the heart, there is always pain along with joy.
It is difficult and wonderful because we—
each and every one of us—
are most wondrously made
yet most wondrously flawed.

Life together here on earth can be good
and is intended to be good by God,
but it is not perfect.

However, we, the simultaneously saint-and-sinner ones,
have a tendency to tear asunder what
God intends to be joined together.

If we are honest, we know that we are hard-hearted—
seeking ways to justify our ways and ourselves
not only before God
but even more before others,
most especially, before our families.

We have all fallen short of not only the glory of God,
but we have fallen far short of the goodness
that God created and intended in, with and for us.

Lutheran Pastor and a former seminary professor of mine,
Timothy Wengert, is fond of saying
that if we ever needed a reality check about how we were living up
to being “good” people—we need only turn
and ask the members of our family
how that was working out for us!
Or as one quip would have it . . .
Don't complain about your spouse.
Just look at who they married!

We are most wondrously made *and* wondrously flawed.

Perhaps this week's teaching of Jesus
is one we would like to sidestep—
well at least the first half.
I'm sure most of us are happy and comforted to cite
the second half with Jesus taking the children in his arms
and blessing them.
Perhaps some of us might say it is one of our favorite bible stories.
Certainly, this is a favorite scene
featured in many stained glass windows in many churches . . .
(even right here at Holy Trinity).

But I don't recall ever seeing a painting or stained glass window
depicting Jesus being questioned on marriage and divorce!

After all, Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage seems harsh,
even judgmental and legalistic.
His teaching no doubts opens old wounds for many people who,
having learned from their pasts,
are seeking to embrace God's grace for their future.
Among us, among our families here are divorced people,
people who have remarried after divorce,
parents of children who have been through divorce
some are children whose parents have divorced.

But we cannot simply dismiss Jesus' teaching as arcane or having nothing to say to us today. We have heard what he has said, now we need to understand what is at stake in his teaching.

The first problem we have is that we think that Jesus is teaching about divorce, when he is teaching about the nature of our life together. In this lesson, he is speaking specifically and particularly about marriage.

In the midst of a hostile encounter, when his opponents are seeking to trap him and bring him into disfavor not only with the crowd but also with King Herod—who, if you recall has recently beheaded John the Baptist for his criticisms of Herod's marriage to his divorced brother's ex-wife.

So keep in mind, Jesus' answer to these questions, quite literally, could get him killed.

Even so, he radicalizes the law, the torah—
Because of your hardness of heart [Moses] wrote this law for you. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.

What then are we to do with all of this?

First, as always, we must deal with Jesus' words in context rather than universalize them.

In the context of an argument, Jesus is being *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. In other words, Jesus is holding a mirror up to the reality of living in a sinful and fallen, hard-hearted world.

Take a look at the text as printed in your bulletin.
It is the evangelist Mark who has indicated
the application as prescriptive in applying it to the church.
This is indicated by the words “in the house.”
When we, in turn, absolutize Mark's application of them,
we do great damage.
Doing so has forced people to stay in loveless,
often violent and harmful marriages,
frequently perpetuating in the children of those marriages
the same abusive behavior in their relationships.
A son who watches his father beat his mother
will be inclined to do likewise with his wife,
and a girl who watches her mother stay and take it,
will feel compelled to do likewise.
This is true of marital relationships
but just as true of any kind of relationship:
teacher to student,
brother to sister,
friend to friend,
neighbor to neighbor.

So, it is important for us to know that
Jesus is *not* being prescriptive—
He is not saying if you divorce,
God will cease to love you and cannot forgive you.
Rather, in describing God's intention in the gift of marriage—
two living together as one,
that is giving themselves to one another in ways
that meet their physical, emotional and psychological needs,
creating and nurturing life in a covenant of
lifelong love and faithfulness.
Jesus *is* challenging the wanton, casual,
selfish approach to marriage—to relationships—
that exists both *then* and *now*.

Jesus is speaking *for* marriage and fidelity
and *against* divorce and legalism—
even a legalism that would keep people
from embracing the gift of new life *after* a divorce.

Jesus understands marriage, life together
is ordained by God *as good*.

Above all and greater than marriage itself,
human kind was meant to live in community.
What Jesus addresses in this teaching is *relationship*—
relationships between husband and wife,
parents and children,
even friends and neighbors,
all relationships.

Jesus knows the damage and pain
that broken relationships cause,
not only to the principal parties,
but especially to children who are often left vulnerable.
For this reason, Jesus does not sanction divorce.
But he also does not ex-communicate
those who divorce from community.

Second, and equally important,
in speaking of God's intention,
Jesus is not saying you must stay in a marriage
when God's intentions for it are not even remotely met.
There are marriages (and relationships)
that are absolutely caustic,
spouses (and friends or others) that are abusive and destructive,
relationships that are completely toxic.
Such marriages not only *mock* God's intentions
but even call into question
whether the two were joined as one in the first place.

Marriages (or relationships) of this kind are not only harmful, but grossly sinful, and God *does not* want us to persist in sin.

Is it not better then to confess such failure and end it, pronouncing God's grace to the penitent?

Such a divorce is not the lesser of two evils, but simply the recognition of such failure. If also an act of repentance, it can be a positive first step toward embracing new life. Divorce and remarriage are not unforgivable sins. *The unforgivable sin is to assume that God cannot forgive our broken pasts and bring us through them into new life that does fulfill God's intentions for us.*

The good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ is about *new* beginnings, new life, and the power to live into it.

A failed marriage, regardless of the circumstances, is a tragedy for everyone involved. I have never spoken to someone who has been through a divorce who did not feel an enormous sense of failure. But failure need not be the end of that story. The pastoral responsibility of the church is to participate in and support Christ's gifts of healing and new life.

The text from Genesis which Jesus quoted to the Pharisees begins with God saying "It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make a partner fit for him,"— *fit* because the partner can do something about the aloneness and isolation— which is not good in God's eyes.

In other words, remarriage after divorce is about claiming God's grace and intention for us and claiming the power of God's reign in our lives in the same way that a child *receives* or lays hands on the kingdom.

It is not accidental that this story about Jesus and the children follows on the heels of Jesus' words on marriage and divorce. We enter the kingdom of God, not by our faithfulness, nor by our achievements, and certainly not by being sinless, but entirely and only by the grace of God—that is God's love for sinning, broken, vulnerable people.

God's gracious reign in our lives is not achieved, it is received.

This is the good news for all of us, married or single, straight or gay, divorced or remarried. God's desire is to give us life.

As with the children, Jesus simply wants to lay his hands on our lives and bless us and our life together. Thanks be to God!