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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
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Mark 10:2-16

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

You may have noticed that I have a few different ways that I begin a sermon. I'm usually pretty intentional about that, and today that is especially true. Our gospel reading is another difficult passage with Jesus' words seeming harsh. Before we get too deep into that I first wanted you to hear that God's word for us is primarily a word of grace and peace.

But today the word divorce is probably the one that stands out for most of us. Every family here has some experience with divorce. If you have not been divorced yourself, there is surely someone in your family who has or is maybe even contemplating it right now.

The divorce rate is something that our society tracks. According to a recent study the divorce rate actually dropped 18% from 2008 – 2016. One of the reasons stated was that the Gen X and Millennial generations are getting married older than Baby Boomers did. Marriage is more common for those with higher educations. People in poorer populations are living together and raising children without getting married and, according to the study, those relationships are less stable. Like some European countries it seems that here in the U.S. marriage is more of a choice these days than an expectation.

We'll see how those divorce rate numbers shake out as the Gen Xers and Millennials get older. Keeping a marriage together over the years is hard work. We love to celebrate 25, 40, 50, and 60 year anniversaries because it is an accomplishment for two people to stay together through all the stages of life.

The Pharisees ask Jesus about what God's law has to say about divorce. But Jesus turns the topic around to talk about what God intends for marriage. He refers back to our Old Testament reading from Genesis today in which God says, "It is not good for man—or the human creature—to be alone."

God created us to be in committed relationships, to stick together for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health. Most of that time that comes in the form of a marriage.

Though the Pharisees want to know if Jesus will back up Moses' law that allows for divorce, Jesus reminds us of what makes divorce an option, the fact that two people got married in the first place. God's good intention is for those who marry to stay married. It is our hardness of heart that leads to divorce.

I was surprised when I started my first call here that it took a full year for someone to ask me to officiate their wedding, and I have yet to have a wedding here in the church. Our daughter didn't have her wedding at the church she grew up in either. The church is no longer the expected venue for weddings. Weddings take place in all kinds of settings and anyone can officiate a wedding these days.

So I am always clear with those who have asked me as a pastor to participate in their wedding ceremony that I'm expecting that they want God to be a part of their marriage. In addition to scripture readings and prayers I also give a homily that expresses how God's love is the foundation of the human marriage.

Back in the days of the Lutheran Book of Worship, the green hymnal that we keep in our pews, the marriage ceremony had an interesting passage that was not carried over into the new hymnal which I use for weddings now. Let's take a look at that. The Marriage liturgy begins on page 202 in the front of the hymnal.

At the top of page 203, before the intentions and the vows are spoken by the bride and groom, the pastor says these words:

The Lord God in his goodness created us male and female, and by the gift of marriage founded human community in a joy that begins now and is brought to perfection in the life to come.

Here we state God's good intention for marriage as a gift to us. And then it goes on:

Because of sin, our age-old rebellion, the gladness of marriage can be overcast and the gift of the family can become a burden.

It's not surprising that this part was not carried forward to the new liturgy. Most couples don't want to focus on the reality that their idyllic dream of family where everyone loves each other and gets along all the time may not be so—all the time.

Then we hear words of promise:

But because God, who established marriage, continues still to bless it with his abundant and ever-present support, we can be sustained in our weariness and have our joy restored.

I've never offered that part of the service to the couples I've worked with, but maybe I should! Instead there is something new that I consider one of the most important parts of the wedding ceremony.

After the couple declares their intentions to share their lives together as a new family I ask them to turn and face all the people who have come to their wedding, and I say:

Families, friends, and all those gathered here, will you support and care for [this couple], sustain and pray for them in times of trouble, give thanks with them in times of joy, honor the bonds of their covenant, and affirm the love of God reflected in their life together?

And, hopefully with sincerity, everyone responds, "We will!"

It takes more than two people to keep a family together. It takes friends and families to remind the couple of the love they have for one another when the going gets tough. It takes encouragement from others to go back and try again when there has been a squabble. It means taking the kids for a while so mom and dad can have a night out as a couple again. It means providing respite care when extensive caregiving falls to one spouse or the other.

But—what happens when a marriage cannot stay together? When there is abuse or distrust or only one person is still in the marriage? Then divorce happens. There all kinds of endings and deaths in our lives and divorce is one of them. Even when both spouses understand that divorce is the best option, we experience a grief much like a death.

Here's the good news. Remember, in this part of Mark's gospel, Jesus is on his way to the cross. On the cross Jesus took on our human suffering, our broken relationships, the pain and injury we dish out to one another. Jesus took it all in his own suffering and death.

And by his resurrection God made a way to bring new life out of the death and brokenness of the world. Jesus gave his body and shed his blood for the forgiveness of sin so that we could experience new life even now.

Jesus uses harsh words in the first part of the gospel reading today, not to condemn divorce as much as to lift up the possibility and promise marriage can be. But not everyone gets married. Not everyone stays married.

That's why Jesus lifts up children as our examples. He tells us to look to these little ones who trust so completely. This is how we are trust in God to guide us to good partnerships in our spouses and to love us whether or not those partnerships last. For God's commitment to us will never be shaken and never be severed. God's love for us is eternal and by his grace we can come to a place of peace.

Thanks be to God. Amen