

Grace and peace to you from the Triune God, who cares about our safety, who is our protector.

It's difficult to talk about divorce in our time and culture today. More than 50% of marriages end up in divorce, so whether or not you've been divorced, whether or not you're a child of divorce, whether or not you know someone or a loved one who has gone through a divorce, there's no denying divorce has affected everyone one of us in this room in some way or another. And even though it's become commonplace, we all know it's still very painful for most people and all those involved. In saying this, I therefore want to uphold and handle the topic of divorce very carefully this morning.

For in doing so, there's still a chance that the gospel of Jesus Christ might just peek through for people who are disheartened by a passage such as ours today. "A parishioner once told [a colleague of mine] that hearing this passage read in church felt like having someone dump garbage all over her. It didn't matter if she'd cleaned up and put on her Sunday best for church that morning, because after hearing these words she felt she couldn't get rid of the stink of her divorce."

I cringe at the thought of this—of someone feeling unwanted by God and unworthy of forgiveness—and during worship in God's house of all places. Therefore, when the Bible in any shape or form begins to undermine the Gospel of God's love and forgiveness for us in Christ, especially when Christ is the one being portrayed by our gospel writers as saying the discouraging word, I know I have some investigating to do so to "unearth" what's at the heart of the matter. Remember, our main objective when reading Scripture is to always, always look for and then work to uncover God's love and good intentions for us within any passage. So let's get out our archeological tools and get to digging.

To start out, I'd like to make the claim that archeologists and historians never really study a clue or artifact in isolation. They instead take in the whole picture. They study the people, the ancient culture and its surroundings; they study the geography and topography involved; they investigate other manuscripts; they speculate about the exact position of the object or artifact in question. So when reading the Bible it always baffles me that we are so quick to read passages in isolation. This can be dangerous and, as an aside, it's the reason why I think bible studies and the study of entire books linked to others in Scripture is so important. It's hard to understand the Bible in its entirety when we only get snippets of it on a Sunday morning.

Therefore, I'm here to remind you that this passage has verses and stories that come before it and after it, and when read as a whole, Mark's gospel employs

certain themes found throughout it that are helpful for us in our understanding. One such theme, for example, that has been paired with Jesus' teachings for the past three Sundays in a row in Mark is Christ's care for and concern for children, the "little ones," or shall we say, the most vulnerable within our midst.

Two Sundays ago we learned of Jesus' disciples arguing about who was the greatest on their way to Galilee. Jesus stops them and says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Then last Sunday we got word that there were others outside Jesus' inner circle casting out demons in Jesus' name. The disciples grew jealous, complaining to Jesus. Again, Jesus' response concerns the vulnerable and those who suffer. He says, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these 'little ones' who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea."

And then today, sandwiched against the topic of divorce, Jesus again hones in on the children. There's something to be said for this. That being, Mark doesn't want Jesus to be portrayed as one who condemns those who get divorced. Rather, both Mark and Jesus are concerned about those who lose out and suffer the greatest as a result of divorce.

Based on the study of Jewish law and ancient marriage decrees, a piece of archeological evidence to consider is this: "There were two schools of thought about divorce in Jesus' day -- both believed a man had a right to put away, dismiss, or divorce his wife. One school was fairly strict -- a man could do this only if his wife were unfaithful; the other was more lenient -- a man could do this if his wife displeased him in any number of ways, including, according to one rabbinic source, 'burning her husband's toast.' Either way, the consequences for the woman were devastating -- familial and public disgrace, potentially severe economic hardship, and limited future prospects for her and her children.

On the other hand, we see time and time again throughout Scripture that a man, without consequence, could have several wives, take on numerous concubines, and seek out other woman with whom to bear children if his wife couldn't give him a child. "Any number of the Bible's 'heroes of the faith'-- including Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon, to name just a few -- fall into this category." Considering all this, I'd therefore like to believe that "Jesus' words were likely intended not to set up a standard by which to judge and stigmatize but

rather to protect women [and children] who were so much more vulnerable before the law than men.” Remember what we said about the vulnerable last week when speaking about “keeping it salty?” Like salt, our job as Christians is to preserve and uplift the true character of all God’s beloved, human or otherwise. When someone or something is being oppressed or put into harmful situations, we need to pay attention.

Let’s keep dusting off even more dirt, shall we? “Along these lines, it’s interesting that Jesus doesn’t just say that a man who does away with his wife and marries another commits adultery [just] in general. Rather, he says that man commits adultery against his *wife*. In the ancient world, if a man was unfaithful to his wife he was considered to have committed adultery not against her as an individual but against her father and her family, the ones who entrusted her to him. But Jesus says it’s against her. So [again], Jesus is acknowledging women as existing apart from their fathers. His concern for the vulnerability of the woman seems a paramount concern [for Jesus].”

But there’s more. In trying to understand this passage and others, there’s always geography to take into account as well. If we look carefully today we’ll notice, Jesus is on route to Jerusalem, walking steadfastly and purposefully to meet his cross and his destiny. Today he detours though, on a road that takes him beyond the Jordan River and across a known boundary. In Mark’s Gospel, location is often an important clue to interpretation. And so it’s worth noting how frequently Jesus goes beyond the prescribed boundaries, be that geographical or social, to meet people where they’re at and to proclaim God’s mercy and grace even if it meant he was challenging common standards or the status quo.”

So I wonder what status quo Jesus would challenge today to meet people in relation to marriage or divorce. Which religious authority or systems in our culture would Jesus go up against today in defense of the most vulnerable in our society? Would he confront a pastor staunchly against divorce, especially if a person felt stuck in an abusive, violent relationship? Would he stand up for marriage for those who are forced to forgo protection, security, and the rights getting married still provides in our society? Jesus challenged laws, even his own religious laws or statutes written in Scripture, in defense of the most vulnerable.

What’s also important is that Jesus was also defending God’s intentions for marriage in this passage.

For Jesus, marriage was more than a legal contract, an exchange of property, or a vie for one’s social status based on the person or position one married into. Rather, Jesus was trying to emphasize partnership, relationship, open vulnerability, and respect within a marriage. Jesus was making the case for a

couple's need to rely on God and one another to get through life intact. In the face of officials who could only view God's intent and designs for marriage in very superficial ways, of course Jesus is going to defend marriage and condemn divorce, especially when it was so easy for a man to divorce his wife and leave her in hardship in ways that were much more devastating back then than they are today.

Jesus' heart always, time and time again, in this passage and more, goes out to the vulnerable and those in need of protection. As we've uncovered from this passage and those similar to it throughout the gospels, it is Christ who put all legalities aside, in the face of religious officials, to assure safety for all and express God's love for all. He does the same for all of us today.

Therefore, if you've faced divorce, just imagine how Christ is still reaching out to you. If your purpose for ending a relationship was because you were being abused or mistreated, God is lifting you up for being brave throughout your situation. If you were or are being neglected and undervalued in your relationship, of course, Christ was and is there with you, standing beside you.

When a couple gets married before God, they make commitments to each other in the presence of God and their friends and family all the while, in doing so, admitting that they're going to need support from God and those they love in order to sustain their relationship. Marriage has and is supposed to have vulnerability at its core. What Jesus is saying is such vulnerability, like a child's, needs to be valued, respected, and most importantly, protected.

When we encounter difficult texts such as this, I commend you for being good, archeological, biblical readers. As Christians, we are to put our trust in the fact that Christ takes all of who we are into account. Christ sees our brokenness. Christ knows our every pain and sorrow. And then Christ pours out his love for us in ways that honor our most vulnerable depths. You have to believe this, for this is the Gospel and we are called to proclaim it so. Amen!