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Our Saviour Lutheran Church  
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, today our gospel lesson touches upon one of the most painful experiences within human relationships, the dissolution of a marriage.

Today's gospel reading talks about divorce.

And we may have heard divorced described as the death of a relationship.

And, personally, I think that description is quite a fitting definition for divorce.

Divorce is the death of a relationship.

And unfortunately, divorce often affects not only the relationship between two people who are married, but affects other relationships as well.

Divorce affects the relationships between in-laws, the relationships of friends the couple have known, the relationships within communities the couple have been a part, like church.

Yes, divorce affects not only the relationship between a married couple, but it also has a rippling effect.

PAUSE

Now, personally, I will say that some of the most difficult work that a pastor, any pastor will do, is that of healing for a couple during the time of a divorce.

This is not to say that a pastor's job is to fix a marriage, or to reconcile a couple per se.

Unfortunately, sometimes a marital relationship is beyond repair.

Unfortunately, sometimes one or both parties in a marriage do not want to reconcile.

Sometimes reconciliation is not possible.

But healing...healing is still possible. All the more, healing is necessary.

Healing for the individual parties is paramount.

But it is hard, hard work, because there is grief.

There is anger.

There is perhaps confusion, distrust, and any number of other emotions.

And, it takes work to sort through those emotions.

It takes work to understand what happened, what went wrong in the marriage.

It takes work to see how to move forward.

Yes, trying to help a couple heal, trying to help the individual parties in a divorce heal, is some of the most difficult work any pastor will do.

And so, when we come to our gospel lesson this morning, we can appreciate better what is going on, for here the Pharisees decide to test Jesus with the difficult topic of divorce.

And we can just see these Pharisees scheming.

“Okay, Smarty Pants, okay Jesus, you who are working miracles, you who are healing infirmed persons, you who teach God’s Word...tell us this, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

PAUSE

Now, in order to understand this test, we need to understand something about the practice of marriage and divorce in Judaism at this time.

For we see that at this time, in Jewish law a wife could not be the offended party in adultery and could not divorce her husband.

Only husbands had these prerogatives.

In fact, husbands could divorce their wives on very little cause.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 says this, "Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, put it in her hand, and send her out of his house (or the second man who marries her dies), her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession."

Does anyone see a problem here?

First, the woman here is treated like so much chattel, like property that can be just dismissed from one's presence.

Second, there is no mention of any accountability on the husband's part.

Indeed, the way this passage reads such a burden as the very guilt of the land is laid upon the shoulders of the wife.

And, we need to remember that at this time, when patriarchy ruled supreme in society, a woman's well-being depended on her attachment to a male figure, whether her husband, her father, or even a brother.

So for husbands to dismiss their wives so indifferently, if a woman had no other male protector, that really exposed a woman to a terrible hardship.

Just to give us an additional sense of some of the vulnerabilities women faced under Jewish law, I share with you the words from Leviticus 20:10 that says, "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death."

Makes us better appreciate what was going on with Mary, the mother of our Lord, and her pregnancy, when Joseph thought that his betrothed was unfaithful, and planned to dismiss her quietly.

Again this verse from Leviticus does not mention any consequences if the husband commits adultery.

So with this background in mind, we can understand better the test the Pharisees pose to him.

For if Jesus says that it is unlawful for a man to divorce his wife, then Jesus is going against the Jewish practice in which men have benefitted to the abuse and exploitation of women.

Thus, the patriarchal society would oppose Jesus.

But if Jesus says that lawful for a man to divorce his wife according to the Jewish law put forth by Moses, well then, women are going to oppose Jesus for the injustice they see perpetrated against them.

So, like a good rabbi, Jesus answers a question with a question.

Jesus asked the Pharisees, "What did Moses command you?"

What do you read in the Torah?

And the Pharisees explain that Moses indeed allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal in order to divorce his wife.

But then Jesus reminds the Pharisees of God's law that trumps Moses' law.

Jesus reminds the Pharisees that from the beginning, early on in Genesis, at the dawn of creation when God created the very first human beings, God had created people to be in relationship.

God had created people to enjoy the gift of marriage.

And God established marriage so that what God has joined together, two people in marriage, no one should separate.

We see then, this passage in Mark is really as much as about justice as it is about the institution of marriage.

Jesus is reacting, Jesus is responding to the abusive and exploitative reality where women were treated as inferior to men.

In short, Jesus is saying, spouses cannot treat each other as property to be discarded.

The fact that this passage about divorce is about justice is highlighted all the more by the message in the passage that follows.

In that passage, we learn that people were bringing little children to Jesus so that he might bless them.

But the disciples intercede and try to stop the people.

But Jesus then responds noting that it is to these little children that the kingdom of God belongs.

In other words, just as women were seen as inferior to men, so were children.

And Jesus is responding to both counts of injustice.

Women and men are to be treated as truly valuable members of the human family, as valuable as men, if not more.

So, this gospel reading as a whole is a truly valuable message that addresses the injustice present in Jesus' day.

PAUSE

But returning to our discussion with which we began this sermon, that is about divorce.

I want to share with all of us something of a compass for all of life, regardless of the type of relationships we experience.

I mentioned that some of the hardest work that people do in life is the healing work that follows the dissolution of marriage.

But, the hard work of healing is not something only individuals in a divorce do.

The hard work of healing is something we all do all the time.

PAUSE

Now, today, we are blessed to have a baptism.

Little Maggie, daughter of Christie and Nick Sheleman, will become the newest member of our church family.

And whenever we witness a baptism in church, it is also an occasion to remember our own baptism.

And if nothing else, baptism is a reminder of the healing power of God that is at work in each of our lives.

Through the gift of baptism, God is healing us throughout our lives.

Baptism reminds us that God has conquered the powers of sin and death in our lives, such that we have the promise of everlasting life.

We have that sure promise that even as Christ died and rose again, so too will we be raised.

But baptism is not just about the promise of eternity at the end of life.

Baptism is also about the ongoing healing process that is continually taking place each and everyday of our lives.

As Martin Luther said, "This life is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness. Not health but healing. Not being but becoming. Not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be. But we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished. But it is going on."

This life is not health but healing. Life is a process of healing.

That sounds counterintuitive, considering that during the life, as we age, we tend to experience more and more infirmity and ill health.

But Christians do look at life differently in this respect.

The spiritual life of a Christian is in truth a process of healing, or growth in righteousness, such that at death, we experience the ultimate healing.

And baptism marks the beginning of that healing process for each individual.

The Spirit overcomes us in baptism and we are then on that path toward ultimate healing.

Maggie is baptized today. She becomes a child of God, a member of our church family today.

And today marks the beginning of her healing process in life.

And the healing work each of us does in this journey of life is hard work. Make no mistake about.

The healing work each of us does includes regular confession of sin as we do in worship each week.

The healing work includes self-examination and self-awareness.

It requires repentance and renewal and commitment to the path of faith. It is hard work.

And sometimes that hard work gets missed and it backs up on us and as a result our relationships get strained, and our relationships are even broken, and we are grieved, and we overwhelm by loss.

It happens all too often to us, not just in marriage.

For sisters and brothers in Christ, it is certain that one way or another, the circumstances of life, the changes and chances of life, one way or another life forces upon us the hard work of healing.

That is why it is important for all of us to be proactive, to be diligent about doing the hard work of healing throughout life, engaging God's gifts of confession and forgiveness, repentance, and renewal...

That is why it is important for us to be ever-engaged in the process of healing, for then when we are bombarded by life, by trials, we are that much more equipped to heal.

Being about the discipline of healing, readies us for those moments when profound healing is necessary.

PAUSE

So that is the advice we receive with respect to gospel reading today.

We are to remember our baptism. We are to remember our ongoing process of healing.

Even as we rejoice today with Maggie and her family as she begins her journey of healing in this life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.