

Dt 24: 1-4      Mk 10: 2-12

Jesus, my husband divorced me because I'm barren. I can't conceive a child, so he sent me away.

Jesus, I was raped on my way home from the fields, and I told my sister-in-law, and she told my husband, and he divorced me.

Jesus, my husband said that I did not please him, so he divorced me.

Had Jesus heard these women's stories, I suspect that his answer might have been different than the one he gave to the Pharisees who asked him about divorce. In his society only a husband could divorce; a wife had no such legal rights, since she was considered his property. Further, a husband could divorce his wife for any reason he chose, even because she "displeased" him. Had one of these wives discarded by her husband come to Jesus and asked about divorce, I wonder how he might have responded.

In today's story, there is no woman pouring out her heart to Jesus, looking for help or asking for forgiveness or begging for direction for her future. There are only "some Pharisees". And they are looking not for help or forgiveness or direction; instead, the author tells us, they are looking "to test" Jesus. They are trying to set him up, to catch him in some legalese. They refer to the Law of Moses, which "allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal [to] divorce his wife". We hear about this Mosaic law in today's Old Testament lesson, from the book of Deuteronomy. It's really more about remarriage than about divorce per se, but it gives us a clue as to how easy it was for a man to divorce his wife. Listen to a few translations of Deuteronomy, chapter 24, verse 1, which essentially says, "You can divorce your wife when..."

When "[a wife] does not please [her husband] because he finds something objectionable about her." That's from the New Revised Standard Version, from which we read today.

When "[a wife finds] no favor in [her husband's] eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her." That's from the King James Version.

When "she becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her." The New International Version.

Or when "[she] fails to please him because he finds something obnoxious about her." That's a Jewish translation called "Sefaria".

Can you imagine these objections as grounds for divorce, for a wife or a husband? Would you tell a divorce lawyer, "I find something objectionable about her"? Or "I have found some uncleanness in him--or something indecent, or something obnoxious?" This Mosaic law on divorce and remarriage is quite removed from contemporary family law.

Jesus doesn't fall into the Pharisee's trap or get bogged down in some minutiae about laws regarding divorce and remarriage. Instead, he uplifts the institution of marriage as a gift from God; he describes marriage by quoting from Genesis 2, the creation story in which the man "leaves his father and mother--and clings to his wife--and they become one flesh". For Jesus, in marriage, God joins two people together in body, mind and spirit. In his response to the Pharisees, Jesus lifts up marriage not only as a legal institution, but as a social and spiritual one as well. Honoring marriage, he prohibits divorce.

This prohibition, however, was not intended to be a proof text to govern divorce. Instead, it was Jesus' response to a specific situation: a Pharisee came "to test him". It wasn't a response to a woman who came to him after being summarily divorced. Nor was it a response to a woman--or a man--whose marriage was toxic or abusive or demeaning. We know from other gospel accounts that Jesus always expected that his disciples follow not only the letter of the law but also the spirit of the law. He also taught them that, when the law interfered with God's life-giving intentions they were not bound by it. When Jesus encountered someone who needed healing on a Sabbath, for example, he didn't send them away in order to avoid working on the Sabbath; instead, he broke the law against working on the Sabbath in order to heal the person. If Jesus had been approached for a ruling on divorce, not by a Pharisee, but by a woman who was cast off by her husband--or by a woman or a man whose marriage was no longer a joining together in body, mind and spirit, I think he would have offered a different answer. Jesus, who was always turning things upside-down, was much more concerned about people living in loving, life-giving relationships than with a legalistic following of Mosaic law. He understood that love sometimes goes wrong, that marriages sometimes fail, and that there are circumstances in which divorce is a couple's most loving option.

What are these circumstances? In Jesus' day, as in ours, there were causes of divorce for which one partner bore more responsibility than the other. These include what I call the "Quadruple A": abuse, addiction, adultery, and abandonment. In each of these, one partner chooses a behavior which is harmful to the other. Certainly no partner should bear abuse at the hands or lips of someone who promised to love until death parts. No partner should be pitted against a mistress of addiction, whether to heroin or alcohol or prescription drugs or sex or gambling. No partner should be rejected for the sake of someone who is younger or sexier or more interesting. No partner should be abandoned, physically or financially or emotionally. In these "Quadruple A" cases of abuse, addiction, adultery, and abandonment, the marriage is damaged by the behavior of one party; the couple's unity of body, mind, and spirit is broken. Unless there is authentic restoration and reconciliation, the marriage won't survive.

But there are also circumstances in which there is no particular fault, in which two partners grow in opposite directions, in which one can't support the other on a new career path, in which there is no longer a mutual, life-giving relationship, for whatever reason. This can happen when a husband who is chemically dependent seeks health, for example, and his wife unconsciously tries to sabotage his recovery. When a wife, who has stayed home to raise children and is ready to go to school, is not allowed to pursue her dreams. When one partner is so married to his or her work that there is no space or time for a relationship with the spouse. When one partner realizes, one day, that the marriage is no longer a marriage.

How would Jesus respond if you came to him because of trouble in your marriage? Would he counsel immediate divorce? Would he require you to stay in a deadened and dead-end relationship for the sake of the institution of marriage? No, of course not. Instead, he would listen, to both you and your partner. He might remind you that marriage is a relationship for life, a holy relationship, a life-long relationship, a relationship in which both partners are responsible to the other, a mutual relationship, an equal relationship. He might caution you that it's not so much about the morals of staying married as it is about the ethics of living rightly in relationship. In other words, he might say it's not so much about rules as it is about living fully, mutually, and faithfully in our intimate relationships. And he might help you recognize that you can--or perhaps can't--mend the relationship.

When someone comes to me in any of these circumstances, whether "Quadruple A" or otherwise, I don't counsel immediate divorce or reconciliation. I listen. I offer to meet with both partners. I suggest a good-faith effort at counseling with a professional therapist. I invite both partners

to reconsider their marriage vows. I pray for them. If they are able to work things out, I rejoice with them. If they can't, instead of judging them, I seek to support each of them. And I offer them a liturgy of letting go of their marriage, a sort of ritual of divorce, so they can each move on in their lives knowing that God is with them.

If Jesus had listened to any of these stories--or of the stories of countless women and men who have been stuck in marriages that were less than mutual, less than responsible, less than faithful--and even downright demeaning or abusive, I think that he might have said something like this: "Beloved, this is a tough world. It's hard work to live in it. Sometimes you make bad choices, and sometimes bad things happen to you. I can't promise that you will find the perfect spouse or that you'll grow old together. I can't promise that you won't be hurt in a relationship or that no one will take advantage of you. But I can tell you that you are worthy of being treated well, because you are my child and I love you. If you need release from your marriage covenant in order to live fully, you have my support. If you have sinned in your relationship, I forgive you. If you choose to stay to work on your relationship, I will work with you. No matter what choice you make, remember this: I will always be with you; I will never leave you alone."

Some of us in this room are single by choice. Some are divorced, some are widowed, recently or long ago. Some of us are grieving the loss of a spouse, and some of us are giddy at a budding relationship. Some of us are dating, some are in exclusive relationships, some are living together, some are partnered, some are married or re-married, some of us are living in the shell of a marriage that has shriveled up, and some of us are longing to find partners with whom we can create life-long, committed, mutual intimate relationships. But no matter what our marital status or relationship status, God provides support for each of us with God's presence and through each other, in community.

In today's gospel reading, we learn that Jesus honors marriage. He wants partners to treat one another with love and respect and concern and commitment. But he also wants each of us to treat all of us in the same way. Of course, a marriage relationship is a particular relationship, and, in it, we promise to "forsake all others", to count that one as "the one", to treat her or him as the most important person in the world. It goes without saying that a marriage relationship or a life-long committed relationship grants mutual and faithful intimacy to the partners in ways that other relationships do not. But all of us can honor the institution of marriage by supporting those who are married or partnered, whether we are married or not. And all of us can support people who are single, whether we are single or not. And we can each seek to live in harmony with one another, offering love and respect and faithfulness in all our relationships. May God grant us each to give and to receive such love and respect and faithfulness in this community of faith, by God's grace. AMEN