

Mark 10:2-16

²Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” ³He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” ⁴They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” ⁵But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

¹⁰Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

¹³People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Genesis 2:18-24

¹⁸Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” ¹⁹So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

²¹So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” ²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Psalm 8

¹O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

²Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

⁷all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

⁹O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your
name in all the earth!

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Grant us your grace, mercy and peace that we might live among your faithful people, serving and striving for justice and peace in all the earth. Amen

Last Saturday at the Central Crossroads Fall Assembly we were joined by Bishop Lee Miller II. He shared a few thoughts about his vision for our synod. The first was a one sentence statement in response to a question he had been asked about his vision for our church in Upstate New York. When I worked in non-profit we called this type of statement the elevator statement as it was a short and succinct way to describe an organization's mission in one sentence in the time it took the elevator to go from one floor to the next. It went like this, "*I dream a church where love activates us to do justice and to share joy.*" Bishop Miller went on to add that justice is love in action.

The second take away I received from Bishop Miller was what he called five practices of discipleship, the 'Grace' mindset. Using the letters of the word Grace he described Grace as Generous Love / Restorative Justice / Adaptive leadership / Collaboration / Experimentation. As I read and reread this week's texts and various commentaries for our Mark text I kept coming back to these two visionary thoughts about our church.

How is it that we are people of God activated to do justice and share joy? How do we live out God's amazing grace with generous love, justice, collaboration in ways that are adaptive and innovative rather than critical, off-putting and harmful?

Two weeks ago we heard Jesus talking about the hard tasks of discipleship and lifting up the children who in that day were basically non-people, powerless with no rights whatsoever. They were among the most vulnerable. This week Jesus continues his teaching to his disciples as they journey from Capernaum into Judea which brings Jesus ever closer to Jerusalem. Chapter 11 of Mark is Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. I suspect Jesus was beginning to feel some time pressure to convey all he felt he needed to convey to his disciples. And always it seems the synagogue leaders are there trying to interfere, question and prove Jesus isn't who he says he is. The lessons he teaches which are interspersed with His passion predictions continue to reinforce that discipleship isn't easy. There are teachings that are hard to bite off and chew on like our gospel today.

Once again the Pharisees are putting Jesus to a test, with their question about divorce. It's important to know that in the 1st century, much like today divorce was generally accepted both among Jews and the Greco-Roman culture. The law basically focused on the legal aspects and in the male dominated society of the day most often put the power in the hands of the males. As is so often the case Jesus answers the Pharisees with a question that takes their question in a different direction – he directs them to God's creation of a helpmate for the first human. In one of the commentaries I looked at the author talked about how in Genesis 1 as God created the world with each step he 'saw that it was good.' Conversely in Genesis 2 we hear God say, "*It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.*" Jesus is questioning the Pharisees intent around divorce. Is it solely for the benefit of one person? As one who has been divorced I know firsthand that while ultimately it may be the right decision and bring about restoration and personal growth, the process is painful.

It was God's intent in creation that we be in companionship. Humans were not created to be alone, but rather in some kind of relationship. What that 'family' looks like is not described in scripture. There are all sorts of families—multi-generational, a group of friends who are co-habiting, a gay or lesbian couple and three children, an ethnically diverse household? One Biblical family is Joseph's whose brothers got so angry with what they saw as him 'being treated better' they threw him in a well and then sold him into slavery. Surely a hurtful and harmful act yet one that ultimately God intended for good. When my children were growing up we were a military family and seldom with our biological extended family on holidays yet, we had 'family' – friends and service members who had no place to go who all gathered together as family. We cared for one another, listened to one another, worked together in meal planning and looked out for each other in love.

While Jesus response and follow-up conversation with his disciples about divorce seems harsh we should consider the 'back story,' because when Jesus teaches there is always 'more to the story,' If we read the second portion of our gospel when Jesus chastises the disciples for keeping the children away this 'back story' may become clearer. Think about Jesus' ministry for a moment – who is it that he reaches out to? He makes the blind to see, heals the leper, and eats with tax collectors. Consider the story in John 8 where the

scribes and Pharisees bring a woman to Jesus who was caught in adultery. The crafty Pharisees again trying to trip up Jesus remind him of what Moses said in the law about this situation, then they ask, 'What say you, Jesus?' His reply: *"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."* *8And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."* Jesus did not condemn this woman. The reality in this situation is Jesus was the only one present without sin. But he also didn't condone what she did – he actually protected her and sent her on her way 'to sin no more.' He also didn't say 'don't commit adultery again, his words are broader – 'sin no more.'

In all these places Jesus protects the one who is vulnerable. The Old Testament laws were written for the protection of self and others. They weren't meant to be used for self-interest which may have been the purpose of the Pharisees' question. Jesus life among us is about protection and restoration of the vulnerable, those without power or status; and it is filled with generous love and forgiveness. Jesus is really trying to get the Pharisees and disciples to think about justice – whatever their actions might be – are those actions taken in a manner that puts someone in jeopardy? Are they actions of caring and concern?

God's realization that it wasn't good for the mortal to be alone is a very clear indication that God understood our need for companionship. Jesus following the Pharisees divorce question with an act of compassion and blessing of the children lifts up this need. It is an invitation to pause and consider who is our family? Who is it that fills our deep need for companionship? It also opens the door to consider what the losses are in broken relationships of any kind and what are the hurts and pain that our actions may at times cause to others. How do we treat our friends? Are we welcoming to strangers? What are the losses when relationships are broken or disengaged – whether through divorce, a rift between friends or even a pandemic that keeps us apart for our own safety? One of the disheartening statistics I learned in preparing for this sermon is that the number 1 cause

of new poverty in our nation today is divorce. Poverty and homelessness have increased significantly in our nation. We have a God of generous love whose intent is certainly not that we remain in any relationships that are hurtful. Rather he calls us into actions that are restorative and just for one another and all of creation.

In this week's synod Mid-week Musing, Michelle Josephson reminds us that 'we are one. We are weakened when our focus is on dividing, separating, segregating, being better than or being less than' another. She poses some thought provoking questions – What if we decided to include others in 'our' world? What if each one of us saw another as part of ourselves? How would our actions change? How might we yearn to understand each other? How might we stop trying to belittle or even emulate one another?

As we think about these questions consider the possibilities if we seek to understand one another more, if our interactions are always filled with generous love, if through our words and actions we always seek to restore justice. Consider the ways we might adapt our actions to be more inclusive, to listen more opening to another's perspective. What opportunities for new experiences, growth in our churches might come about from reaching out to new people, those we don't know, maybe even have avoided in the past and choose to collaborate, to try something new – sort of an experiment. Think about the possible new relationships, even friendships one might find. What if in taking these steps we made care for the most vulnerable in our communities our priority?

Our lives are filled with difficult and often painful experiences brought on by unhealthy relationships, illness, violence, and decisions that need to be made that are 'between a rock and a hard place' decisions. I can't imagine having been in our president's position to have to decide to withdraw our troops from Afghanistan – whatever way he chose was going to cause pain to someone and make someone angry. As people created to be in companionship, when our lives are broken, ripped apart by life's tragedies, it hurts. Jesus lifts up the vulnerable to remind us that we need to act with love and compassion even in times when we have to say or do the hard things.

In one of this week's D365 devotions Molly Logan wrote, "No matter what we've done or failed to do, Jesus openly welcomes us as a beloved member of his assembly." While the psalmist asks, *'what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you*

care for them?’ Jesus gives us the answer – he does not condemn us or try to trip us up like the Pharisees. Rather as it says in 1 John 4:7 we are told, ‘You are beloved as a member of the family of God, just as you are.’

Prayer – Loving God, you know my name, just as I am, all the holy and unholy parts of me. You welcome me to your embrace and everlasting life. Thank you. Help me to encourage and welcome others today, (and each new day) into my life and to your blessings in joy today. [d365 prayer 9/30/2021]

Amen.