

“Isn’t that Beautiful?”
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Proper 22B, October 6, 2024
Mark 10:2-16

Getting married is easy. Being married takes work.

Driving home from the hospital with your newborn child is easy. Being a parent takes work.

Getting baptized is easy. Being a Christian takes work.

As a priest, one of the most joyful things I get to do is to preside at weddings in our parish church.

Weddings are beautiful at Saint Mary’s in Richmond. The bride and groom sit in special chairs where everyone can see them. They’re nervous and excited.

They are surrounded by family and friends. There is beautiful music, the procession, the proclamation of the Word of God.

Then, the bride and groom stand before the altar, where they speak life-changing vows.

Next, we have the rings, the kissing, the applause. Sometimes, we celebrate the Eucharist. And then - off they go to the reception.

Such joyful celebrations!

It is easy to say ‘yes’ when you are surrounded by beauty, laughter, music and people who want nothing but the best for you.

It’s easy to get married. But... being married... that takes work.

Saying ‘yes’ at the altar is easy... then you realize that your ‘yes’ will cost you something.

Once you're married, every decision you make is no longer about me, it is about we. You can no longer ask: Is this good for me? You learn to ask: is it good for us?

Being married requires talking through the hard stuff, putting the other first, stripping away selfishness. Being married requires the work of communication, and adapting to differences. Being married requires forgiveness, and patience, then more forgiveness, then more patience...

And when the children come – God willing - you realize that, when it comes to forgiveness and patience, you ain't seen nothing yet!

Some days spouses may ask, 'why are we still trying?' But then you meet a man and woman who – by God's grace - have been doing the hard work of marriage for 40, 50, 60 years. You look at them and say, "that is beautiful. They are beautiful. Their marriage is beautiful."

I hope that we all know some couples who inspire us. The couples who have paid the price, who have carried the cross, who have learned the hard lessons... and there they are, still loving, still married. Not just getting by, but thriving.

In their love, you catch a glimpse of God's love. In their forgiveness, you catch a glimpse of God's forgiveness. In their patience and faithfulness, God is showing you something that cannot be learned anywhere else.

Thank God for the couples who say 'yes,' and then live their 'yes.' Thank God for the ones who understand that love isn't easy, but love is the one thing that makes life worth living.

Their example inspires us. It inspires me.

When some religious leaders approached Jesus in the 10th chapter of Mark's Gospel with their question about marriage and divorce, I don't think they were seeking to inspire anyone.

They were trying to trap Jesus. They're hoping he will say the wrong thing so that they can accuse him to higher authorities and get him into trouble.

They ask – “is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Even as they ask the question, they already know that the Book of Deuteronomy permitted divorce. They’re trying to trick and trap Jesus.

But Jesus will not be drawn into their destructive game. Instead, he first acknowledges that Moses, as a concession to human imperfection, allowed for divorce in certain circumstances.

Next, Jesus reminds his listeners – then and now – about God’s original intentions for marriage. Jesus speaks of God’s beautiful plan for married love. What a gift this love can be, if we are willing to cooperate with his grace, and work at it!

Jesus draws us back to what we hear in the Book of Genesis: God makes us male and female. And it is God’s loving plan for many of us, that when we meet the one whom God intends for us, we experience joy in their presence. In the passion we experience for each other, in the love that makes our heart burst, we are experiencing a glimpse of God’s passionate love for us.

Then one day, you’re sitting across from the one you love. You look at them and realize, “This person knows me better than anyone else, and still they love me in a way I don’t deserve.” You cannot imagine your future without them in it.

And in that moment you understand what the Book of Genesis says: God has made the two of you one. So you decide to say ‘yes’ to God’s plan. “They are no longer two, but one flesh.”

God takes marriage seriously, because God takes us seriously. For so many of us, our deep fulfillment is found when we stand before God and a congregation of loved ones, and we say ‘yes’ to each other, and ‘yes’ to God.

Jesus reminds his listeners that this is God’s plan. This is God’s intention for marriage. I think Jesus wants us to remember the couples whose marriages have inspired us. I think Jesus reminds us of this, because it is so easy for us to take each other for granted. And when we take each other for granted, we withdraw, we hold grudges, we keep score, we stop communicating, our hearts head in different directions.

In Mark's Gospel, after Jesus reminded his listeners about God's magnificent intention for marriage, Jesus and the disciples go into a nearby house, where the question of divorce gets revisited.

Jesus says: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery. And if a woman divorces her husband and remarries, she commits adultery."

In my 31 years of experience as a priest and pastor, I don't think that any man or woman who has stood before an altar to recite marriage vows actually plans to get a divorce. I don't think that women and men enter into marriage thinking that they will be the ones who are left behind, or that they will be the ones who will walk away. And yet, divorce happens in almost every family. It's happened in my own extended family.

Jesus's language about divorce may sound harsh to modern ears. But please remember: as Jesus confronts his ill-intentioned questioners in today's Gospel passage, his first instinct is to inspire us by reminding us of God's dream for marriage.

I believe that Jesus is encouraging every spouse - hold on to the dream that you had on the day of your wedding! Treasure the example of the spouses whose marriages inspire you. In the busyness of life, it is easy to forget why we said 'yes' in the first place.

The 'two become one.' This is God's plan – and it is beautiful when we see it lived well.

Still, why does Jesus choose to use language that sounds so harsh to us? He says that those who divorce and remarry commit adultery. "Adultery." Ouch.

Perhaps this pointed language is Jesus's way of telling us that God takes marriage seriously, and God takes divorce seriously. I think Jesus is inviting us to do whatever is humanly possible to stay faithful to our vows. "Let your yes mean yes."

Still, if this were the only time Jesus ever spoke about 'adultery,' you might be justified in thinking that he sounds pretty harsh.

But let's not forget that in the 8th chapter of John's Gospel, the religious leaders drag a woman before Jesus. And what has she done? She's committed adultery!

The religious leaders all have rocks in their hands. The law said that a woman caught in adultery could be stoned to death.

What does Jesus do? He says, "Let the one without sin cast the first stone." Rather quickly, every rock is dropped, and every accuser disappears.

What does Jesus say to the woman who committed adultery? He says, "Woman, I do not condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Do you hear that? This woman was caught in the act adultery, but Jesus' response is not condemnation – it is mercy for the sinner, forgiveness, and the desire to help her move forward with strength, and hope, and integrity.

Jesus takes marriage seriously. And he takes people seriously. And... he seriously loves us.

Often, when parishioners come and share the painful narrative of what led to a divorce in their lives, my heart breaks.

Many Christian churches provide outreach to and support for those who seek healing after their marriage has broken up.

So many divorced people struggle to trust again, they are hesitant to become vulnerable to love again. They thought that 'the two had become one.' But hearts and lives, once united, are now separated. And that is a truly painful thing.

So painful, in fact, that it becomes a challenge to believe that anyone - including God! - can and will love me with a faithful love.

After the heartbreak of divorce, is it any wonder that a woman or man might wonder, "Will God walk out on me, give up on me, turn away from me?"

Perhaps that is why Mark's Gospel moves immediately from this hard conversation about divorce, to a refreshing scene in which Jesus welcomes children into his presence. He embraces them. He loves them. You can picture his smile. You can almost hear their laughter.

His stern disciples were trying to send this unruly gaggle of kids away. But Jesus is at home in messy situations.

And he reminds us that children can teach us something crucial about the kingdom of God.

If they are surrounded by adults who care for them, children are constantly open to receiving and giving love, consistently willing to trust, ready to be embraced into the arms of the God who, in Christ, has chosen to become one with us.

Sometimes, human beings promise us something, but may not be able to keep saying 'yes' to that promise.

But our Lord and savior speaks an 'eternal yes' to each of us. Yes to mercy. Yes to healing. Yes to love. Yes to life.

Isn't that beautiful?

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