

“Let the children come to me,” Jesus says, “for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” (Mark 10:14b)

The evening had started so wonderfully – a beautiful dinner table for ten people had been laid out. The host clearly had pulled out the nicest China and crystal, candles were lit, and colorful centerpieces completed the setting. If Martha Stewart had been a dinner guest that night, she would have been pleased. *If* Martha had been there, she would have reminded all present that religion and politics do not make for good dinner conversation. Unfortunately, that sage advice was on nobody's mind that night. Sometime between appetizer and main course, the topic of conversation had shifted from polite chitchat to more serious matters, and by the time desert was ready to be served the mood in the room had become definitely charged (that may be an understatement): voices were raised, somebody had pounded a fist of the table, somebody else was cursing, and a fourth person had started to cry, while others had already left the table, angry.

In recent years, dinner scenes like this have become way too familiar to too many people, and It has become increasingly harder for family and friends, neighbors and colleagues to share in meaningful conversation. Take comfort: the Gospel witness sees Jesus repeatedly present at awkward conversations, sometimes even at the dinner table. Today's conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees is not an exception.

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife,” the Pharisees ask him. It seems like a question that invites theological and philosophical speculation, like when priests hang out at night. Or perhaps, the legal and social implications of a current question. Perhaps, it's a test to see if Jesus meets the proper standards for orthodoxy, as proclaimed by the religious authorities of his day. We still like to test and condemn each other for the lack of biblical soundness or for, what some see as, theological innovation. But really, the pharisees' question to Jesus is so much more – it's a dangerous, even deadly question.

Let's turn back to John the Baptist for a moment. John preached repentance and practiced a baptism by water for the forgiveness of sin; a message that gained him a certain following. But John did more: he took on the powers-that-be and indicted King Herod in Jerusalem, the most powerful Jew around. See, Herod had divorced his wife so he could marry his brother's wife, his own sister-in-law, who also happened to be his cousin. Many rejected the marriage, anticipating God's judgment on the people, and John preached: “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.” (Mark 6:18) It was a proclamation that led to John's imprisonment, and eventually to his infamous beheading and death. So yes, “is it lawful to divorce” is not an innocent query, but a deadly sword.

In the history of the church, the Pharisees' question "is it lawful" has too often been used to undergird a strong rejection of divorce, and too many people – at a time when they were most vulnerable and broken – have been met with harsh words from church leaders and experienced shame and rejection by the hands of religious folk, including people they may have shared a pew with for many years. Marriages and partnerships end for many, many different reasons. Sometimes couples simply grow apart overtime; sometimes there are clear and immediate causes, like abuse or infidelity; sometimes the acts and decisions of one break a marriage apart; and, sometimes both partners have not been at their best and both contributed to the end of the relationship. The point remains: the church is not called to serve as an arbiter, assigning blame or fault. The end of a relationship, for whatever reason, is a time of sadness and grief, and perhaps also relief, and I believe the church is called to be a companion in that pain; to walk along, when people put back the pieces of a broken life.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees: "What God has joined together, let no one separate" is used by the church in the defense of its historic theology on divorce. It is part of the priestly proclamation that follows after a couple has made its vows. But the key here is: what God has joined together. Sometimes in our life, things we do fall in line with God's plans for Creation. But so often, they do not. That's why we do pray our confession not once in awhile, but weekly and daily. God wants wellness and wholeness for God's people; God wants creation to thrive. And yes, no one on earth can change or alter God's plan, but we should change or alter all that doesn't confirm to God's plan. That is, all that doesn't lead to the flourishing of God's people and God's creation, including relationships that lead to pain and suffering to the parties involved.

To ask what God thinks about divorce is a heavy topic. Not because it is lofty and abstract, but because it is not: it is concrete and very real. We are talking about our own experiences, the experiences of family members and friends, the experiences of fellow parishioners. Because these are painful and difficult conversations, Jesus again places children in the midst of the conversation, literally. While we as adults may speak harsh words of judgment to each other, we may be less inclined to do so to the children among us, to the ones entrusted to our care, to the ones who rely on our protection.

When we treat each other with care and consideration -- like we would our children -- with love and kindness, with support and encouragement, with advice and guidance, we surely find ourselves on God's side. No matter how God may judge us in the time to come, I doubt we will be held accountable for having loved our neighbors too abundantly.

The lectionary has led us to difficult and painful places, last week and this week. We have listened to readings that may hit close to home, and I have tried to reflect on them with honesty and humility. Please know that this church is a safe place for you. Please know that I commit to be a safe resource for you. Please do not think: "with two churches, Erik must be a busy priest." I am, but I am never too busy for a conversation. If you ever want to talk, reach out – call, email, text – I am here, for you.

Together, we endeavor to make the church a place where we practice the reality we wish to see for ourselves, each other, and the world. A community of loving care, of abundant grace, and unconditional welcome. A place where we are reminded that God is with us at our most vulnerable times, and walks with us as we heal our relationships with each other. Amen.