

Message for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (10/3/2021)
Genesis 2:18-24
Mark 10:2-16

What do we do when Holy Scripture hurts? I'm not talking about the healthy discomfort we feel when we come across a passage that pierces the heart, a passage that reveals something broken in our lives and offers the possibility of a better way. When that happens, it's a bit like spiritual growing pains. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.... Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."¹ That hurts, but it's a good pain, a growing pain. "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."² That hurts, but it's a good pain, a growing pain.

No, I'm talking about the kind of hurt the church inflicts when we wield scripture as an instrument of judgment, extracting all the grace in order to put people in their place. I'm talking about the kind of hurt that happens when we weaponize the Bible. As you may be aware, that has frequently been the case with our Gospel from Mark today, Jesus' famous exchange with the Pharisees on the subject of divorce and remarriage. The Pharisees ask a question about legality, but Jesus probes beneath that surface-level question to get at the deeper question of God's purpose for relationship in the first place. Human beings are made for companionship, as the story of Adam and Eve implies, so Jesus declares, "What God has joined together, let no one separate." It's worth noting that his

¹ Philippians 2:3-4.

² John 8:7.

rigorous standard for marriage protects the well-being of women who in first-century Palestine might face hardship, even destitution, as a result of divorce.

But, that original context hasn't necessarily informed Christian attitudes toward divorce and remarriage in the time since. Jesus' pronouncement here in Mark has often been interpreted and applied rigidly, rubbing salt in the wounds of people who've endured their fair share of hurt and shame already. This week, one of my pastoral colleagues mentioned that as recently as her childhood the Olympia Presbytery prohibited ministers from getting divorced. She recalled with grief the departure of a beloved pastor who was required to set aside his ordination and leave the ministry when his marriage ended.³ Laypeople, too, have been estranged from their churches, or worse, pressured to remain in abusive or unsustainable marriages owing to a legalistic interpretation of Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel. But, is that the most faithful way to read it?

It's important to remember, first of all, that **both here and elsewhere, Jesus sets an impossibly high bar for human faithfulness**. Consider, for instance, last week's Gospel commending self-mutilation: "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off.... And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off.... And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out...."⁴ Of course, that's hyperbole; Jesus doesn't expect us to maim ourselves on account of our faults. And, we know from the reference in today's Gospel that divorce has always been a reality, even in the time of Moses.

³ Joyce Emery, Preaching Peace Tacoma Table, 9/28/2021.

⁴ Mark 9:43-48.

So, what is the purpose of the unattainable moral standard that is so common to Jesus' teaching? It's clear that **kingdom values are vitally important; covenant love and faithfulness demand something of us. But, our adherence to those values is not a precondition for grace; it isn't up to us to prove our worthiness in God's sight, but only to trust God's goodness in all circumstances.** And in fact, that's the message of the second half of our Gospel from Mark today. To borrow the words of one interpreter, "One does not enter the kingdom through the fulfillment of any abstract legal principles, including those related to divorce and remarriage," but only "as a little child," that is, with "complete dependence on God" as our loving Parent.⁵

That's a better interpretation of today's Gospel. Still, the damage this passage has done raises a more fundamental question about how we read the Bible in general. **What do we do when Holy Scripture hurts? One basic answer to that question is *don't make it hurt worse than it has to.*** And, one way to do that is to let go of the expectation that scripture will always give unambiguous answers to the question of who's right and who's wrong, who's in and who's out. In spite of the longstanding assumption that the Bible provides straightforward and consistent rules for life, it doesn't.

Take divorce, for example: It's forbidden in our Gospel from Mark, but the Apostle Paul makes a concession: "If any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever... he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is

⁵ Charles L. Campbell, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, 143.

an unbeliever... she should not divorce him.... But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the [believer] is not bound [by the marriage].”⁶ So, which is it? Is divorce prohibited by scripture or not? It’s not entirely clear. And, that is to say nothing of the way these passages completely ignore the experiences and relationships of LGBTQ+ believers.

Before you rack your brain for answers to such difficult questions as these, consider the following reflection from biblical scholar, Peter Enns:

The Bible is not a Christian owner’s manual but a story – a diverse story of God and how [God’s] people have connected with [God] over the centuries, in changing circumstances and situations.

That kind of Bible works, because that is our story, too. The Bible “partners” with us (so to speak), modeling for us our walk with God in discovering greater depth and maturity on our journey of faith, not by telling us what to do at each step, but by showing us a journey of hills and valleys, straight lanes and difficult curves, of new discoveries and insights, of movement and change – with God by our side every step of the way.⁷

I imagine that those who’ve been divorced resonate with the idea that life is a journey of both “hills and valleys,” both “straight lanes and difficult curves.” Of course, that’s true for the rest of us, too. I hope it’s also true that you sense God’s presence with you even and perhaps especially in the worst times. After all, if Christ is Emmanuel, God with us, then no matter our hurts and hardships, we can trust him to gather us all, as children, into his embrace and bless us.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 7:13, 15.

⁷ *The Bible Tells Me So*, 163-4.