

**18 Pentecost
Mark 10:1-15
4 October 2009
Christ Church**

In my senior year of college, my friends and I were fond of looking through wedding magazines in search of the perfect dress for our wedding day. Despite the Women's Lib movement, most of us anticipated getting married and having a family.

One of my friends was awarded a fellowship to study at a well-known medical school. Not long after she began the program, she met the man that she would eventually marry. Hers was the storybook wedding. Those of us who attended the wedding were moved by the setting, the exchange of vows, and the joy in the faces of the newly weds.

Over the years, we kept in touch by way of Christmas cards. My friend always sent a picture of her family: husband, wife, and one lovely daughter. My friend never seemed to gain weight; her Christmas newsletter was filled with accounts of

travel, achievements, and community connections; and I always felt a bit jealous. Her life seemed perfect – that is – until a few years ago.

Instead of the usual fun-filled letter, we received news that my friend was getting divorced after 25 years of marriage. In a later conversation with her, I discovered that the marriage was anything but perfect. Her husband, a compulsive perfectionist, was verbally and emotionally abusive. She retaliated by turning to alcohol abuse.

Since her sobriety depended on it, she asked him to go to counseling with her. Unable to face his own weaknesses, he refused. She knew that her daughter, then a teen-ager, was observing her. Rather than let her daughter see the continuation of abuse and ridicule, my friend decided to leave the relationship and get a divorce.

In today's Gospel Jesus tells the Pharisees, "...what God has joined together, let no one separate." Later, when his disciples question him further on this matter he says,

“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” Jesus’ words are clear – divorce is a sin.

Any of us who have lived through a divorce – our own, our parents’, our childrens’, our friends’ – know how drastic, how devastating it is. The breach that divides a relationship begun in deep love is destructive not only to the couple, but to their parents, to their extended family, and especially to their children.

Unfortunately, the church historically has used this passage of Mark’s Gospel to exclude the faithful from communion. This is wrong-headed and counter-productive. Not only is it a constant, shaming reminder of their failure – it separates them from the path to healing and redemption.

One thing I know: Jesus never wants us to be separated from him. We need to take a closer look at this Gospel to understand what’s at stake here.

In the time of Jesus, Jewish Law made divorce permissible for a man. Women had very low status – barely human. Marriage was an exchange of property, not the sacrament that Roman Catholicism would recognize centuries later. The Law protected the rights of the man so that another man could not take his wife.

As is true for any religious community, not everyone agreed to the terms of the Law. For example, the Essenes, one among several sects of Judaism, argued for the permanence of marriage. They were especially vigilant about the sexual improprieties of the Kings.

The Pharisees who approach Jesus are not as interested in his view on divorce as they are on tripping him up. Their confrontation of Jesus comes on the heels of Herod's divorce. Given John the Baptist's beheading, Jesus puts himself at physical risk for speaking out against divorce.

But, when the Pharisees bring their question about the legality of divorce to Jesus, he doesn't rise to their bait.

Instead, he goes to the heart of the matter, setting a new standard for right relationships. He speaks to the integrity of a bond between a man and a woman, a bond of mutual respect and love.

I am assisting in the supervision of the Episcopal seminarians at Candler. In a discussion earlier this week, one of them asked how they might preach on today's Gospel about divorce. When I explained the context of time and place in Jesus' teaching, another seminarian responded, "My parents got divorced when I was in sixth grade and I still think it sucks."

Sometimes in our attempt to comfort and reassure those who suffer through divorce, we risk minimizing its impact. Any breach in relationship, any failure of love, is a sin. To avoid that truth inhibits our potential for healing.

My friend's divorce began long before the papers were signed. It began when her spouse ceased to respect and cherish her as a fellow traveler on the road to redemption. His refusal

to make the necessary changes that would have enabled them to live in mutual love killed all hope of healing and reconciliation.

So, did my friend commit a sin in finally asking for a divorce? I don't think so. In this case, the sin dated back to those early manifestations of belittling criticism.

Not all marriages end because of abuse. Many good marriages are threatened simply by wear and tear. For all married people, maintaining such close intimacy with another human being is a challenge we must rise to every day. God wants us to accept this challenge in love and in faith – relying not only on our feelings of the moment, but on our deep commitment; relying not on our own strength and will alone, but on His ever-present love for us.

This power is available to all of us – but we still must make the choice to love. It's not magic. When we choose NOT to love in the day-to-day – not to be patient, not to have compassion for our spouse's faults and failings, not to be

willing to acknowledge our own – we sin. And these small, day-to-day sins add up. They can overwhelm even a good marriage.

But, there is good news in coming to terms with our sins of unloving. Christ’s redeeming love, Christ’s forgiveness and mercy make it possible to make a new start every day. God has not left us in the bondage of sin. Through Christ we can learn from our mistakes, choose healthier ways to live, do the work that it takes to learn the lessons of authentic love.

Even if the marriage finally fails, God does not abandon us. God loves us in a way that is so powerful and so complete that it’s hard to believe, sometimes. God has given us many things to help us along the way: His Word ... the love and encouragement of family, friends, and our church community ... couples counseling, when needed ... and, in our hearts, a wonderful capacity to love, to forgive, to laugh at ourselves, and to persevere. Through prayer, we can talk to God and

pour out our troubles and ask for help. God never abandons us.

My friend has since remarried. She has found someone whom she can love and who loves her well. This is what God intends for her and for all of us. When we acknowledge our sin and ask forgiveness, God makes a new way – a way that always leads to his redeeming light.