Living in the Pews

When I first read the Gospel reading for today, my first inclination was to skip over it altogether and preach from another reading.  At first blush, it would seem that Jesus comes down hard on those who’ve gone through a divorce.  “What’s the Good News in that?”

So, I wanted to opt for a more user-friendly passage.  But that seemed like a copout.  Like it or not, divorce is a fact of life, both within the church and without.  Statistics vary, but most surveys put the divorce rate somewhere between 41% and 50% for first marriages and even higher for second and third marriages.

Even more disturbing is that when those individuals experience a divorce many of them feel their community of faith provides rejection rather than support and healing. And this is doubly sad: If anyone needs to hear a word of encouragement and support, it’s those who are going through a divorce. You’d think it’d be something we talk about a lot, but it’s just the opposite: We seldom, if ever, talk openly about divorce, and when we do, it’s usually negative.

And so, I decided to take the Gospel reading head-on and ask: What does this passage say about divorce?  What’s the Good News for those who are divorced?  The passage begins with the Pharisees coming to Jesus testing him, and asking him, **“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”** It’s clear the Pharisees were up to something.  They weren’t seeking Jesus’ wisdom; they were looking for a way to entrap him.

What the text doesn’t say is that Herod Antipas was standing in the background. If you remember, Herod Antipas divorced his wife to marry Herodias, the wife of his brother.  When John the Baptist confronted Herod about it, Herod had John the Baptist imprisoned and then beheaded. So, here’s the trap: If Jesus said it was unlawful for a man to divorce his wife he might well join the ranks of John the Baptist.  On the other hand, if he said it’d be okay, he’d contradict the teaching of the Torah and be subject to the charge of blasphemy.

Instead of falling into the trap, Jesus asked the Pharisees, “What did Moses command you?” And they said, “Moses allowed a certificate of divorce to be written, and to divorce her.” This refers to Deuteronomy where it says a man could divorce his wife if he found something objectionable about her. Something objectionable?!  That could mean anything from adultery to a bad hair day. The result was that in Jesus’ day, divorce for the most trivial reasons, or for no reason at all, was tragically common.

So, when the Pharisees tried to trick Jesus, Jesus pointed back to God’s original intent, that marriage is a covenant relationship in which a man and woman come together as one, and live out their lives in mutual love and devotion. To reduce marriage to a matter of expediency – as the Jews did in Jesus’ day – where the wife was the property of the husband, with whom he could do whatever he pleased – was to distort the whole concept of what God intended.

What does all this mean for us today?

First, it means that the covenant of marriage is still just as valid today as it was in the beginning of creation. Ideally, when a man and a woman marry, they commit themselves to each other in such a way as to form an exclusive relationship of love and devotion: The two become one. That’s not to say it’s easy.  In today’s high-paced and stress-filled world, it’s harder than ever to have a healthy marriage.  Yet, in spite of all the obstacles, God ordained the covenant of marriage for our benefit.  Ideally, we’re not to live alone, but in loving and committed relationships. In an ideal world, there would be no such thing as divorce.

That leads to my second point:

We don’t live in an ideal world.  We live in a fallen world, in which we as humans always comes up short of the glory of God.  That means, like it or not, divorce is a reality. The truth is, in spite of our best efforts, marriages fail.

There are many reasons why marriages fail and all of them, in one way or another, point to the reality of our human frailties.  Whether we’re too immature, too self-centered, too wrapped up in our work, too undisciplined – the list is endless – we never fully live in the image of God in which we were created.  We always fall short.

If you’re not divorced, chances are someone you know and love is.  Unfortunately, divorce is not going to go away. That leads to my third point, which is what I hope we will all take home with us today.

When divorce occurs, we need to be there with a word of encouragement and support, not judgment and criticism. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard someone tell me that when they went through a divorce, the church was the last place they could turn for help and understanding.  And I’m not talking about people off the street; I’m talking about people in the pews worshipping with us. They are as much of our family as anyone could be, yet, when their marriage came apart, they were on their own. And that’s a shame because divorce is like a death, only it’s the death of a relationship instead of the death of a loved one; and in the wake of death we grieve, and when we grieve we need those around us to sympathize with us and console us, not chastise us.

I’ve personally witnessed as a judge and lawyer people’s struggles who are going through a divorce. Often times, friends and family don’t understand and judge. These people need their faith families support more than ever.

This is the Good News, not only for the divorced, but for us all: In the Catholic faith, we’re always given another chance.  God’s last words are words of forgiveness, love, and mercy. We can best see this in the person of Jesus Christ who said:

**Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest.**

If there’s anyone here today who’s laboring under the burden of guilt and shame because you’re divorced, give that burden to God and leave it behind you.  If you’re still holding on to hurt and anger caused by a divorce, let go of that, as well. Let God dispose of the hurt and the pain.

Although I am talking about divorce today, this same sentiment goes for any area of our lives we struggle with. As Catholic Christians, we need to follow Christ’s example of love and mercy, not judgment and condemnation.

In Christ, all things are new.  Let that be the Good News for us this day and forever.