Whenever this text from Mark is read, we tend to hear it in an intensely personal way.

This is especially true for those who have been divorced, are going through a divorce, whose parents are or were divorced or even have been close to someone who has been divorced. This passage can have the tendency to make divorced people feel even worse about what has happened to them than they already feel. The passage can be used by one spouse to force another to stay in a marriage where he or she should not stay. The passage can even be used by church bodies to regulate the behavior of their members.

I know that it seems these days that a lot of people don't take marriage seriously, that they act as if it is as easy to get out of a marriage as it is to get into one. And while that may be true for a few, it's not what I've seen over the years I've been a pastor.

More often than not, I've seen people grieve divorce as much as some grieve death, for divorce is most often the death of a way of life, of promises and partnerships. Margaret Atwood writes, “A divorce is like an amputation; you survive but there's less of you.”

Jesus understood that. Jesus grieves as much for those who divorce as they do themselves. He wishes for all people relationships that are strong and enduring.

But I don't think divorce in and of itself is what Jesus and the Pharisees were talking about in Mark. I think there are at least two important messages that rise out of this section of Mark. Notice Mark writes, “Some Pharisees came and to test Jesus they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'” The Pharisees came to Jesus to *test* him, to try to trap him into saying something they could use against him in the very near future. This is not a discussion about love, marriage and divorce. It's a *test,* not even one particularly about divorce but about the law. There were a couple of schools of thought about divorce in the Jewish law of the day. Both believed that a husband could divorce a wife but not a wife her husband. One school took a very narrow approach, saying a husband could only divorce his wife in the case of adultery. The other school said a husband could divorce his wife for any number of reasons: for adultery, for not fixing a good meal or for not being as attractive as he wished. Perhaps the Pharisees thought that if they could trap Jesus into choosing one way of thinking over another they could discredit him or persuade people to turn against him.

This is what Jesus knew: in his culture, if a husband were to divorce his wife, the wife would be cut off totally from her source of income, from any kind of security and from provision for her children. Jesus also knew that God's plan is that relationships be more than legal matters but rather ways to share more abundant life through mutual dependence and emotional and physical health. When the law treated divorce as a matter of convenience for men, it was distorting both the institution and the well-being of women. Jesus insisted that his interrogators recognize that what they were asking him was a matter of protecting the vulnerable in their society. That is why, I think, Mark includes in this section the story about people bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might touch and bless them. Children had no status in the culture, they could not make money or own property. If children were orphaned, often there was no one to make sure they were cared for. Mark tells us that Jesus was angry when his disciples tried to stop the children from coming to him and why Jesus said the very kingdom of God belonged to children, the most vulnerable of all.

It was not so long before that the disciples had been traveling with Jesus and arguing among themselves about which of them was the greatest. Remember what Jesus told them? “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child – the most powerless person in their society - and put the child among them and took it in his arms and said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Jesus repeatedly spoke about those in his culture who had little or no power, the most vulnerable ones, and how he came for them, to protect and care for them, to feed and clothe them.

In fact, throughout the New Testament we don’t see Jesus' *tolerance* of or *pity* for the poor— we see his fierce love and even his *preference* for the poor and vulnerable.

Jesus was born to a nobody teenage mother. The first people to know of Jesus' birth were nameless shepherds, living on the fringes of society. The widow's offering was worth more to Jesus than the richest man's treasure. And the first to witness Christ's resurrection from the dead was either one woman or two, depending on which gospel you read.

So, the first important message from the passage is that Jesus has an orientation toward the most vulnerable and he calls us to love them as much as he does. The second message is that God has placed us on this earth to be in relationship with one another.

For many, maybe even the majority of us, that happens in marriage. Marriage is intended by God to be a place where two people can be completely and totally who they are in the presence of one another, where they have a partner they can lean on in hard times and in good, where they form a family in which they serve God together. If they are fortunate enough to have children, they are to raise them to know God and to love and serve others as Jesus has taught us all. Marriage, when it is rooted and sustained in love, is a union in which both parties can honor and serve both one another and God.

But marriage is not the only kind of relationship in which that can happen. Some people, after they divorce or their spouse dies, do not marry again. Some people never marry, but that does not mean they are denied the chance to know human love and to share it. Deep and abiding friendships. Strong family connections. Brothers and sisters in the community of Christ. These are the relationships in which we can find love and support of the very deepest sort.

Because we are human and because sin can harm or tear apart any of these relationships, the church is the place where we can come in all our brokenness to find healing. Those who are divorced, those who are in unhappy marriages, those whose marriages are strong but who still hurt one another from time to time, those whose friendships have shattered, those whose family relationships are strained, those who feel lonely and isolated all the time: we all come to kneel before our Lord and to find that in him our brokenness is welcomed, healing is poured out, hope is offered to each and every one of us.

We are free here to share our vulnerability, our weakness and uncertainty. The world may tell us never to let those things show, but Christ calls us to share our brokenness with him and one another. He offers us a community born from brokenness – a body broken for us, blood shed for us. Forgiveness showered upon us. Hope a gift to be unwrapped. You and I find community in many places – at home, in friendships, in our work and the places where we live. Christ may be found in abundance in all those relationships but the community of Christ is where all our relationships come together, where they are nurtured and fed and honored.

This is where we are free to share our brokenness and our grief. This is where we find strength for a journey on which we sometimes encounter hardship and pain, disappointment and anguish. And this is where we are drawn together in one love, one forgiveness, one calling: to act together as Christ's hands, reaching out to the most vulnerable among us with his saving love.

Amen.

*Pentecost 19B*

*October 4, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Mark 10:2-16*