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May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This Gospel text is not a favorite text on which to preach. As you just heard it begins with the Pharisees asking Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” The mere mention of the word divorce sets a tone that no one wants to start out with. Too many of us have suffered from the pain that it causes, whether from our own divorce, our parents’ divorce or the divorce of a close friend or relative.

While I was away and working on this text, trying to find some good news in it, I talked about it with my family at dinner. Made for an interesting dinner conversation, I’ll tell you. After I relayed the text to them, the text you just heard in the reading of the gospel, my daughter spoke up and said, “That does not sound like something Jesus would say! Do you think the writer must have missed something? Maybe he just wrote it down wrong!” The other people at the table agreed. “It just sounds so mean,” they said.

I had to agree with their sentiments, but I also stuck my neck out and assured them that I thought Mark had not missed anything and that his telling of this verbal exchange with the Pharisees was more than likely accurate. I told them that what we have here is meaning that the words taken only literally fail to immediately convey. And it was only after really wrestling with this scripture that the “good news” was revealed to me. Let’s together take a look at the situation that Mark described. We’ll begin with the Pharisees asking Jesus the aforementioned question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

First of all, we know - just like Jesus knew - that the Pharisees never asked a question of Jesus so that they could learn something new. They asked him what they thought were “trick” questions so that he might get trapped into saying something blasphemous. They wanted a reason to arrest him. He was a real thorn in their sides. So when the Pharisees asked Jesus if a man could legally divorce his wife, he turned the question on them asking, “What did Moses command you?”

Now at this point in the story it is important for you to know that modern marriage and divorce barely resemble the concept of ancient marriage and divorce. Marriage today is most usually about love that has emerged and blossomed between two people. Marriage in the time of Jesus was a primarily a socio-economic arrangement out of which love might grow. Marriage in most of the western world today is between two people who share a deep commitment to each other. Marriage then was strictly between a man and a woman. Divorce in ancient times was the dissolution of a man’s financial arrangement to provide for a woman and that usually extended to any children she bore as well. Divorce today is a complex legal morass. Divorce in ancient times did not involve judges and courts and attorneys.

As the scripture says, due to the hardness of hearts in human beings Moses did allow divorce. It was one of the many laws spelled out in Deuteronomy. But it’s important to note that in Jewish law only *men* could initiate the divorce. The law required only that a man write out a *certificate* in order to dismiss his wife. It was quite literally a dismissal; very much like being fired from a job. Any man could dismiss his wife for committing adultery or even for the most inauspicious of reasons like serving unsatisfying meals or not cleaning the animals’ stalls.

Here's where the hardness of hearts shows up in spades. The consequence for a man who divorced his wife was that he no longer had any obligation to provide for his wife. She was no longer a financial burden to him. The consequence for her was utter poverty and shame. She was considered tainted as far as society was concerned and she had nothing, literally nothing to live on. She had two options to provide for herself and her children: begging and prostitution. Can you imagine any more vulnerable situation?

Here's where Jesus' cleverness turns the tables on the Pharisees. Where the Pharisees' reliance on Deuteronomy supported their understanding of divorce, Jesus turned to God's original intent for man and woman that is found in Genesis. Keep in mind that Jesus was talking to the Pharisees about ancient marriage and divorce situations. He was not speaking into our culture that experiences marriage and divorce differently. Jesus was most interested in the inequality that was created by divorce in their time. His aim was to point out the injustice that the Deuteronomic divorce law created. Jesus pointed to God's intent in Genesis that the man should leave his family, his community and his connections to join together with his wife. They were intended to enter into this bond on an equal basis, both coming into it to be a support to the other. The scripture says, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

When two become one we assume each one is of equal value. One plus one equals two. Not one and two-thirds plus one-third equals two. Each human being who enters into the bond of marriage brings their whole selves into the relationship and each self has equal value in God's eyes.

Jesus further levels the playing field when he adds the note about adultery. He puts the icing on the cake of his argument when he says to the Pharisees, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another *she* commits adultery.”

After Jesus said that, the Pharisees’ heads would be spinning. They knew that in Jewish law at that time a man could never be found guilty of adultery, only a woman could be found guilty of that. And they knew that no woman could ever under Jewish law at that time divorce her husband. After they considered that pronouncement for while they might realize what Jesus was saying. After I’ve considered it for a while I realize that Jesus is letting them know that God finds it absurd that humans would create laws that fail to consider all people of equal value and worth; hold all people to the same standard regardless of whether they are male or female.

Mark’s Gospel wants to make clear one more point about equality. At the time Mark wrote his gospel children were considered to be the least of society. They were considered to be a nuisance and just creatures to be tolerated until they matured and became useful. So when the disciples, who considered themselves to be Jesus’ inner circle, attempted to send little children away of their very important leader Jesus stopped them. Jesus welcomed children. He hugged them and blessed them. Jesus lowered himself, from society’s point of view, to acknowledge them. By blessing them he lifted them up and revealed that God values them equally, too; as much as the disciples, as much as the Pharisees, as much as any living adult.

It’s consistently amazing to me just how much we can discover when we intentionally, and with open hearts and minds, explore scripture. We start out with what

appears to be a text that was “missing something” and we find out that there is so much to be revealed to us - just by carefully examining the text in its original context. I hope you will join us for Formation this year to do just that. We offer it for all ages... that means you, and you and you and you.

Today we have learned an important lesson about our God. In light of the difficult week many of us experienced last week during the hearings taking place on Capital Hill, this lesson is ever more important - at least in my mind, it is. God cares much more about each one of us than about our politics or even our denominational preferences; God values Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians and Independents. God values Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists... EQUALLY. God as creator works through all of us to reveal his kingdom that is right here among us. When we are connected despite divorce and disagreement by mutual respect for each other's humanity; when we are connected by agape love, the love that Jesus prescribes we can make God's kingdom our reality.