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Monika Wiesner

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Divorce

Monika Wiesner

*Pastor, St. Matthew's Lutheran Church
Conestogo, Ontario*

Text: Mark 10:2-16

Divorce. Even the word sounds ugly. Sort of like “grudge.” And in fact the two often go together, don’t they? Divorce is something we don’t necessarily feel comfortable talking about, especially in the church. We know divorce happens “out there,” and that’s where we’d rather keep it: “out there” and away from us.

And yet Jesus himself talks about it. And that is good, because statistics tell us that over one-third of all marriages end in divorce these days. Divorce is a reality in our culture, it is a reality in the church at large, and it is most likely a reality in many families here today. We all know of the struggles and strains that face young couples as they begin a life together. And no doubt we have also heard of families separating after *many* years of marriage. There seems to be neither rhyme nor reason, yet these things happen. We need only look to the plethora of self-help books in our bookstores to realize that many people are hurting from divorce today.

When a marriage fails there are no easy black and white answers, and there is seldom a simple solution. Sometimes alcoholism, violence, or abuse shatters the dreams of a couple who once promised each other support and friendship. Sometimes emotional neglect or adultery violates the promises made years ago. Always causes and solutions remain elusive. But the pain is real. So many today may listen to these words of Jesus and hear them with guilt and a heavy heart.

To understand truly what Jesus is saying here, we need to take a closer look at the culture of that day. Throughout the history of Old Testament times and well into first century Palestine, women were considered to be “property” and so were completely dependent upon fathers and then husbands to care for them. A husband could divorce his wife on a whim, and for the most trivial of reasons, even though this might destine her to a life of poverty or even prostitution to stay alive. He could simply write a “bill of divorce,” put it into his wife’s

hand and send her out of the house in a matter of minutes. However, a wife could not divorce her husband, and this fact more than anything reflects the huge disequilibrium of rights and power.

Addressing the culture of the day Jesus is telling his listeners that they should not “commodify” life. Jesus is challenging the “hardness of hearts” with his words. Husbands and wives were *not* to treat each other with disrespect, nor randomly cast each other aside. Indeed, in marriage there is to be a life-long bond of caring, of mutuality, of connectedness.

When that bond fails, Jesus implies, the first step is to mourn that failure. Before we point fingers, we must look into our own hearts, into our own lives. Each of us – each and every one of us – is a frail and vulnerable human being. We are human beings, created by a loving God, in God’s very own image, in fact; and yet we are capable of hurting each other. We are, as Jesus says, capable of much “hardness of heart.” Our very humanness determines that we will sin over and over again. Yet God loves us in our humanness. God knows our frailty, our brokenness, and still God loves us with an unending love. That is what the grace of God means. God sees us as we really are – and still God loves and accepts us. We remain people of God, no matter what. So we can mourn a failed marriage, and see divorce through the eyes of God’s grace.

Is Jesus saying that we are to remain forever in unsatisfying and hurtful relationships? I don’t believe that is the point of his words. I believe Jesus is being very realistic. He recognizes our weaknesses, our potential to make *ourselves* so important that we do not care for others. We are quite capable of casting each other aside or hurting each other, for our own benefit. In the Gospel reading Jesus identifies the two weakest members of his society, women and children, and encourages his listeners to care for them with their hearts, with kindness, with mercy, with justice. Women and children were *not* to be property; they were not to be disposable. Certainly, they were not to be treated with contempt. The point of Jesus’ words is that we are to care for each other. Rather than establishing hopelessly high standards that are impossible to maintain, Jesus is instead calling us to conduct ourselves so that we may be a blessing to each other.

A powerful and vital way of seeing the church is as a “hospital,” a place where one is accepted with all one’s faults and frailties, a place where one’s heart can find healing. So it follows that caring for

persons going through separation and divorce can be a powerful ministry of the church. Certainly, no stone should be left unturned, no effort spared, to bring about the reconciliation of a couple contemplating divorce. But sometimes, in spite of great effort, such efforts fail and separation and divorce happen. Nevertheless, *healing* of a failed human condition can still happen. It then becomes our privilege as church, as people of God, to journey with each other through these darkest of days. We remember that we are “hospital to the hurting,” and that a family facing separation needs mercy, not condemnation. The family needs support and acceptance, not isolation or shunning. They need to feel the arms of Jesus around their shoulders in the form of human touch. They need, above all, the people of God authentically caring for them without judgment.

Several years ago I was working as a nurse on the maternity ward of a hospital in Mississauga. I noticed from one patient’s chart that she was registered as “Lutheran.” There are very few Lutherans in Mississauga, and so I introduced myself as also being Lutheran and we chatted a bit. During our conversation my patient shared with me that she was in the process of going through a divorce from her husband, an alcoholic, and had in the meantime met a kindly young man who was the father of her new baby. She wanted this baby baptized but she was not sure of her welcome in the Lutheran Church, given her present marital situation. When asked, one pastor had already refused to baptize her baby. She said to me, “That’s okay. We’ll go to the Salvation Army church. They take everybody.”

I must confess that, as a Lutheran, these words really hurt. She did not feel welcome in the church of her birth. I told her I would speak to the pastor of the Lutheran Church closest to her new home and get back to her in the morning. When I called the pastor that evening, the pastor told me to say to the young couple, “Tell them they’ll be welcomed with open arms.” And, indeed, they were. Several weeks later that same pastor phoned me to invite me to the baptism of this child. And several months later this young couple was married in that same congregation. Last year their second baby was baptized as well. They have been members of this congregation since their initial warm welcome. This is the grace of God at work. It looks beyond behaviour; it looks beyond worthiness; it does not judge, but looks for redemption. The grace of God is just love unleashed. It welcomes us with open arms.

For those of us who have not been touched by divorce, today is an opportunity to reflect and give thanks for the many blessings in our life. It is a time to be thankful for the mystery of grace by which both partners can participate in the Reign of God in their own homes. It is also a time to look around and see how we might bring healing to others who may be hurting.

For those of us who have lived through, or may be going through, the heartaches of the disintegration of a marriage, this is a time to allow others to care for us. It is a time to pause and to remember that God walks with us in all that comes our way. God is with us every step of the journey, whether we feel God's presence or not. God is there!

For all of us, this is a time to remember that we are all on the journey of life together. For our frailty, our very humanness, Jesus allowed himself to be hammered to a cross, so that our sins may never be counted against us. So who are we to judge the sins of another? For that matter, who are we to judge the life of another?

It is our privilege as Church to care for each other. Whenever people are living through times of stress or heartache, we remember that the Church is a welcoming community of faith, which takes everybody in, and with open arms. Just as Jesus welcomes each and every one of us! *Thanks be to God!*