

Today we are going to talk about divorce. Before you rush for the exits, this conversation will not go the way you might fear. We need to talk about divorce because in today's Gospel Jesus says some things about divorce that seem harsh to anyone, much less to those families who have suffered it. This is one of those times in the Gospels when context—the atmosphere of written words and lived history that surround what Jesus says—matters a lot. We need to paint a picture of the local social context in which Jesus says what He does, but without feeling like we are in a seminary class on 1st century Palestinian Jewish marriage customs: perhaps interesting but not helpful. We are here not for information about God but for help from God and from one another. So let's begin differently.

My parents divorced when I was in high school. There is a lot that can be said about that experience, but we will focus on one positive episode—a conversation with our priest—that marked me indelibly and shaped me into who I am. Our family was religious; my father, my mother, my older brother, and I were all deeply involved in church life and ministry. Over the span of the several hundred Sundays we spent in worship that measured my childhood and adolescence, I had heard a part of today's Gospel reading many times. Jesus tells His disciples, "It is said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matt. 5:31-32)."

Given my parents' impending divorce, this was troubling to me. In addition to everything else any other teenager might feel in this circumstance, I was worried about what these sayings meant spiritually for my family. So I met with our priest.

Our priest talked with me about the part of the wedding ceremony in which the bride and groom vow to stay together "until we are parted by death." Without disrespect, he explained that the Roman Catholic church, as an intellectual heir of the structured Roman legal system, interprets "death" legally and literally. Again, without disrespect, we know that Roman Catholics are taught to believe that a marriage does not end unless and until one or the other partner dies. But then our priest told me that, like Eastern Orthodox Christians—like the Greek Orthodox or the Russian Orthodox—Episcopalians understand some things more poetically than literally. For example, in the case of divorce, we believe that what dies is not the husband or the wife but their relationship. Sometimes the emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual bond between a couple simply gives up the ghost. We know that our physical bodies may die suddenly or unexpectedly; we know that they may

die from an injury or a disease after a slow decline. The relationships that make a marriage can die in the same way: quickly and traumatically or almost imperceptibly slowly. Divorce, therefore, is a pastoral crisis with legal consequences—the decree from a court is simply a death certificate that acknowledges what has already happened.

People in the Intensive Care Unit do not need to be shamed or judged, even when part of the reason they are in the ICU is because of their own decisions and behaviors. Those patients already know why they are there. What they need—what any of us need—is for someone to hold their hand, to listen to them as they talk about their fears and regrets, and to pray for them and with them. So it is with people whose marriages are on life support, are terminal, or have coded blue. Of course divorce, like any other heartache, was never a part of God's original will. But there are a lot of things we go through that were never a part of God's original will. Regardless of our marital status, we are all broken in myriad ways. Was divorce a part of God's original Will for any of us? Of course not. But there are a lot of things in this world that are not a part of God's original intention for us. That is why, from His Throne in Heaven, God the Son of God entered into His own creation. From His love for us He freely chose to live and die on the Cross as us as to restore, renew, and recreate God's Original Will for us into His Ultimate Will for us. But we cannot enter into that restoral, that renewal, that recreation until we accept that, like anyone who mourns, we need compassion and mercy. Sooner or later, life teaches us that we simply cannot stand on our own two feet.

With this in mind, we go back to our Gospel reading from the three-chapter long Sermon on the Mount. After God delivered the Hebrews from slavery, He led them to a mountain at which Moses received the divine Law from God and from which he shared it with the people. Like a second Moses, in the Sermon of the Mount Jesus leads His followers to a mountain. He does not present a new set of divine Law; He doubles down, triples down, quadruples down on the Law that God first shared with Moses. To those who believe that they have successfully built a ladder of righteousness to Heaven which they can climb by successfully following God's Law, Jesus tightens the screws that show what that righteousness looks like and what it requires. You don't murder anyone? Great. But do you get angry with anyone? Then you have broken the law of love, which is God's Heart. You remain faithful to your spouse? Great. But have you allowed yourself to wonder even for a split second what it would be like to be married to someone else? Then you have broken the

law of purity, which is God's Heart. Whereas the Old Testament laws—which are pure, good, and true to God's mind—were about doing good things or avoiding doing bad things, Jesus's teaching drills down into the heart of the Law, the Heart of God, our inner heart: the realm of intentions, motives, instinct, and emotion. With these and other hyperbolic statements, Jesus levels the moral playing field and reveals that, as St. Paul writes to the Christian in Rome, "there is no distinction...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:22-23)." All have sinned. Bible Study leaders have sinned. So have community service organizers, donors to Godly causes, priests, monks and nuns, and even saints like Peter and Paul who while gifted by God the Holy Spirit would be the first to admit (and did profess) that they are no more personally righteous than garden-variety sinners like us. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not shame sinners as if He were some moralizing nurse in the ICU; we already know that our lives are a broken mess and we know why. He does this to save the self-confident self-righteous to crack open their ribs of stone in an act of radical open-heart surgery so that they, too, might learn that their need for a Redeemer is as greater if not greater than the prostitutes, tax collectors, and other sinners with whom Jesus seems to spend most of His time.

This is where the context comes in. In His reference to divorce and adultery, Jesus speaks to the men. In that culture, women could not initiate divorce—only the men had that option. Further, the grounds for divorce and its legal and financial consequences were laughable. Some schools of Hebrew instruction taught that a man could divorce a woman for any reason at all: maybe even for over-salting his dinner. For the woman, a divorce was devastating. Women were not permitted to own property and had no source of independent income. Further, the shame of being divorced meant that many could not return to their families. Therefore, they needed to remarry; their desperation meant that they could not be too picky. Jesus tells the men—who, by the way, are not passive listeners but are His active followers—that they view marriage too lightly. This is an insult to the heart of God, who views marriage so highly that He uses its image to describe His relationship with Israel in what we call the Old Covenant. Christ, the Son of God made man, came among us to rescue His Bride—which is His whole church—by laying down His life for us and for everyone who accepts Him: everyone who accepts that they need to be rescued and who trust that Christ the Son of God is the only One Who can do it. He made us in the image and likeness of God, and God is essentially relational love. God is the perfect union of the Three Persons of

the Holy Trinity, with the Father as the Lover, the Son as the Beloved, and the Holy Spirit as the Relationship of love between the Father and the Son which is so perfect that He is another Person. In the beginning, God intended marriage to be a hint or a foretaste of perfect, divine union. But this is a fallen world, and everything good is fragile. Those who know that they and their marriage are broken are far closer to the Kingdom than those who think they have themselves and marriage all figured out. As the contemporary prophet Taylor Swift sings in her recent hit *Anti-Hero*, “It’s me. Hi. I’m the problem. It’s me. I’ll stare directly at the sun but never in the mirror.” In Christ, God has held up a mirror to us so that we can see the truth—we need God, and that even before we ever understood this, God had already reached out with His palms pierced by His exclusive and exhaustive saving love.

My parents divorced about forty years ago and since then God has led each of them to meet and marry truly wonderful people. I love them and I thank God for them. My stepfather Will loves my mother with tender devotion and my stepmother Alice showers cheerful affection on my father. Even now, as my parents walk further into seniority and occasional moments of frailty, their beloved spouses walk with them to doctor appointments, through falls, and beyond other health challenges and always bring them home. This is what God does for us, who through the grace given us at baptism, are together His Bride. He walks with us through our weakness, lifts us up from our falls, carries us to His hospital—the church—and will always bring us home to Himself all the way to the end. That end, of course, will be only the beginning of our eternity with Him, never to be parted from Him, falling ever more in love with Him forever.