

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 3, 2021

GENESIS 2:18-24 | PSALM 8 | HEBREWS 1:1-4, 2:5-12 | MARK 10:2-16

Some of you may remember that in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, the old green hymnal, the marriage rite had a major twist right at the beginning. The wedding party would walk down the aisle, the couple would see each other for the first time, people would be taking home videos on their big VHS camcorders, and the pastor would announce, “Because of sin, our age-old rebellion, the gladness of marriage can be overcast and the gift of family can become a burden.”

Now, I’ve only officiated a half a dozen weddings or so, so I’m not operating with some huge sample size. But no couple I’ve ever worked with has ever requested that line read at their wedding. And it’s easy to understand why. Too ominous. Too cynical. Too depressing.

But I have found myself saying some version of that to people at the end of their marriages or at the end of their relationships. “The gladness of marriage can be overcast and the gift of family can become a burden.” And it isn’t ominous or cynical or depressing. In fact, I think for most people it’s actually sort of comforting. Today’s gospel might give us some idea as to why.

In today’s gospel reading, the Pharisees ask Jesus a question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Before we say anything else here, we have to remember that when the Pharisees talk about divorce, they’re not talking about the institution we know today with alimony and lawyers and all the rest. In the context of the New Testament, divorce means a man handing a woman a piece of paper that dissolves their marriage such that the woman is, essentially, kicked out of the house and left on her own. It negates any kind of responsibility. The certificate she’s given is an *apostasion*, which comes from the Greek for “abandoned” or “relinquished.” It’s the sort of word you use to refer to your property. That’s what the Pharisees are talking about when they talk about divorce. “Is that lawful?”

Jesus volleys it back with, “What did Moses command you?” This is a classic Jesus move where Jesus asks people to answer their own question. And the Pharisees reply, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” And if you check in Deuteronomy, this is technically true. So far, this is pretty much what we expected.

Where it gets interesting is Jesus’s response, his explanation of why this law exists. Jesus says this law exists because of the hardness of people’s hearts. The law exists because people are flawed. Because people are shaped by broken systems. Because people have hardened hearts. And there may be times when undesirable things are technically allowable because they’re better than a worse alternative.

And to maintain some sort of order, to create some semblance of justice, we need laws and rules that allow people to live in peace. In Lutheran theology, we call this the “first use” of the law.¹ You don’t want the free hand of the market sorting out which side of the road people drive on. You want a rule. The law constrains behavior to promote life.

But notice a subtle little flip in the language here. The Pharisees haven’t actually answered Jesus’s question. Because Jesus asks what Moses *commanded*. The Pharisees are stuck on what Moses *allowed*. Jesus is focused on what kind of life God intends for creation to have. The Pharisees are focused on how far they can push the law to their own ends. They are, to use Jesus’s own word, “hard hearted.” And they are hard hearted not simply because they are flawed and formed by broken systems, but because they take the law that is meant to promote life, and they bend it around to serve their own ends. *How far can I push this? How much can I get away with?* God commands them to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly, and they ask if they can pick one and get partial credit.

So the issue in question here has less to do with divorce in particular than with the universal impulse to shape our lives in accordance with what is technically allowed rather than what is divinely intended. And that isn’t true just of marriage but about any relationship, any institution, any possession that leads us to think *How far can I bend this to my own interests and still be within the letter of the law?* We start to go awry when we use the law not to promote justice but to excuse our ill-treatment of others.

¹ David J. Lose, *Making Sense of Martin Luther: Participant Book* (Fortress Press, 2017), 68.

This is why that line from the *LBW* marriage rite is so interesting. Because you could take that line about marriage being overcast by our own hard heartedness, and you could swap in a whole bunch of things. Because of sin... the gladness of education can be overcast. Because of sin... the gladness of work can be overcast. Stewardship can be overcast. Service can be overcast. Public safety can be overcast. Community can be overcast. Essentially any institution, any relationship, any identity has the potential of becoming overcast by our desire to use it for our own ends instead of the wellbeing of our neighbors.

And that critique of using the gifts of God and the gifts of others for our own ends is precisely what is behind Jesus's understanding of marriage. The Pharisees understand marriage in terms of Deuteronomy. Is it technically allowable for a man to abandon his wife if she does something he doesn't like or he wants to go be with someone else for a change? What's the story Jesus uses to understand marriage? It's the second creation story from Genesis. "So they are no longer two, but one flesh." Jesus understands marriage not in terms of contracts and score-keeping but in terms of reciprocity and recognition. Instead of asking what is the bare minimum you have to do to still be legally married, Jesus asks us what marriages, partnerships, and relationships might look like at their best. They are relationships formed not by meeting a minimum standard of law, but relationships that are reflective of God's love for us.

But as the *LBW* puts it, those relationships are formed in a broken world, too. And oftentimes by the time we're talking about the possibility of divorce, we are way past the types of relationships of reciprocity and mutuality that Jesus was talking about. If Jesus thinks divorce is impossible, we know there are situations where marriage is impossible, too.

Even so, it would be a mistake to throw it out completely. Because Jesus's rejoinder has quite a bit to say to those of us who have gotten used to asking so little of each other. Who so often ask not what is commanded by God, but what is technically allowable. Who try to find redemption by finding loopholes in laws, not by finding eternal life in love.

And we could take Jesus's use of that Genesis story—that story of God's intentions before things get overcast by our greed and hard heartedness—and ask how it might inform all of our identities, relationships, and institutions. Not simply marriage but friendships, service, education, public safety, civic life, and all the rest. And how might they change if we believed that we could never cut ourselves off or relinquish our responsibility from other people. It's difficult not to look at our debates over how public life is structured, and wonder if we would be better served by asking what is possible instead of what is allowable.

Jesus tells us that we were created and are called to more than the bare existence of life. That as one of our hymns puts it, we "by love, for love" were made. The joy of life may be overcast and our hearts may be hardened, but the love of God cuts through.

And so we go on living, serving and loving, brought together as one flesh in the body of Christ. And what God has brought together, let no one rent asunder.

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