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Longing for Love, Grace, and Mutuality

Mark 10:2-16, NRSV, emended

(As the crowds gathered around Jesus,) some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?" Jesus answered them, "What did Moses command you?"

They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Then, when inside the house, the disciples asked Jesus again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to (those who brought) them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Allow the little children to come to me; do not stand in their way; for it is such as these who belong in the Reign of God. Truly I tell you, whoever does not accept God's dominion as a little child will never be a part of it." And Jesus took the children up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Uff-dah. This is one of those Sundays when I want to put a warning on the day: "It's a rough text, ya'll." But let me begin here: one of my favorite poems by the poet and mystic Hafiz is called "Every City is a Dulcimer." At the end of the poem, Hafiz writes,

Birds initially had no desire to fly,
what really happened was this:

God once sat close to them playing
Music.

When he left
they missed him so much
their great longing sprouted wings,
needing to search the
sky.

Listen,
Hafiz knows,
Nothing evolves us like
love.

From Daniel Ladinsky's translation in The Gift: Poems by Hafiz the great Sufi master.

I love that it is love and longing that causes birds to sprout wings. And I wonder, then, what about people? What has changed in us because love has come down among us? We, too, have a great longing for this love—for deep mutuality and expansive graciousness wrapped in the vulnerability that is self-giving love. At its best, marriage is one human answer to this deep longing, a vocational call that is a mirror, though admittedly a dim one, for the love of God for humankind.

Dearly beloved, when we gather on the occasion of a wedding, we claim we gather in a celebration of love. This day, we believe, is pivotal in the life of the couple, and we create rituals that are meant to be expressions of the couple's love and intimacy. We have fallen head over heels for this idea of romantic love and set as an ideal the passion felt in early love. Unfortunately, too often this love cools, and our culture offers us few tools to face the endless obligations of family life. In the end, what we claim to celebrate is something that is simply not meant to last. Romantic love and passionate intimacy face challenges when it comes up against the brokenness we bring to every relationship. When the highlight of our evening is filing our nails while binge watching Netflix—that is, when we are simple too exhausted from our day-to-day lives—what will fill the longing for love, grace, and mutuality?

Struggling with this institution is not a new human endeavor. Jesus is asked to field a few questions about one of the two possible endings of marriage: divorce. You will note that the question drips with a patriarchal understanding of marriage. Not only does it assume a husband and a wife, but assumes a very lopsided power dynamic. It assumes marriage exists for the pleasure of the husband. And, among Romans, women could bring a marriage to an end, but there were different words for when this happened. In Jesus's time, among Jews, it was unlawful for women to initiate divorce, though some did. And men needed few reasons for divorce. Moses permitted a man to divorce his wife if there was—quote—“something objectionable about her.” Furthermore, among Jews and Romans, only a woman could commit adultery against her husband; a man's philandering was of no consequence. The end of marriage in the ancient worlds showcases relationships devoid of mutual affection, of wild forgiveness born out of vulnerability, of grace made cheap by claiming only a few worth of it.

But, as we read today, Jesus includes the women, includes the possibility of their divorce, of their feelings, of their forgiveness. That Jesus includes women, that he uses the same language for their desires to bring their marriage to an end, sayings something about the purpose of marriage. Rather than being about passion and one partner's satisfaction, Jesus refers his listeners to a different piece of Torah—Jewish law—not to Moses's permission to

divorce, but to Genesis, to the idea that in marriage spouses become one flesh, a deep and, hopefully, sustaining intimacy. The marker of marriage, then, is not the status and pleasure of one spouse or the other, but about the mutuality shared among them. At its very best, marriage points beyond itself to God's goals for all of humanity. Two people, equal in belovedness, live toward one another as Christ lives toward us. We are given not just to our spouse, but we are given to humanity, to partnership because, as God said, "It is not right that [we] should be alone."

I think it is this deep longing for...enfleshment that has caused so many of us to fight for the right not just to love but to be joined to our partners. Is not the fight for interracial marriage, for gay marriage, for anything that doesn't look like some false ideal of man-and-woman, a fight not for passion, but for mutuality, for the kind of equality that welcomes children as royalty, the kind of equality that caused Paul to pen, "there is no long Jew nor Greek, no longer slave nor free, no longer male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus"?

That marriage is a longing, then, tells us that we aren't given in marriage, but called into it by virtue of our baptisms. At its God-inspired ideal, marriage conveys to each partner a measure of God's grace—the very grace lavished upon us in our baptism and which sustains us throughout our lives. Baptism is about who we are in Christ as complete and full human beings. It isn't just who we are at our holiest, but who we are in our becoming. Emerging from the water, we are called into life, into vocations. Baptismal vocation, borrowing Frederick Buechner's famous definition, is where the world's great need and our deep longing meet. It isn't just our careers, but also our meaningful volunteer work. This morning we will welcome several of our young people into a journey the church calls Confirmation. This, too, is a baptismal vocation, to deepen our relationship with God and neighbor through greater understanding of Scripture and the Sacraments. But vocation is more: being a student, becoming a parent, caring for our own parents as they age, singleness, and marriage. The world groans for community and mutuality. Our longing to experience God's love will, in time, call many of us into marriage.

But let us speak the truth, Beloved, we are not *all* called into this vocation, and, sometimes, we are called *from* this vocation. All marriages, after all, will come to an end, and this end is never easy. There are just two ways marriage ends — divorce or death. What does it mean about the institution of marriage if we know it is destined to end? I think this is where the language of call matters so much. When Pr. Lecia and I were talking about the texts this week, she gave me such a helpful frame for understanding this: "some calls are for a lifetime, and some are only for a season." This frees us from the idea that what is broken was always a failure. Many of the people who have permitted me to walk beside them during their divorce have noted that the major turning point in the dissolution of their marriages came when they were able to embrace their new vocation as single, to look with hope to what this could mean for all their relationships and their life. If we understand marriage as a vocation to which we are called because we are

baptized—because we are the beloved of God—then we can also consider death and divorce not to be the end of love, nor mutuality nor the sharing of God’s grace among us, but merely the door through which we find new expressions of mutuality and grace. Merely a new avenue for finding and growing the kin-dom of God.

Beloved in the end, it isn’t our goal as Christian to be the best at marriage. I would expect to see equitable divorce rates among Christians as among non-Christians, really. The truth is, our brokenness makes mutuality, equality, daily forgiveness, and self-giving love a particularly difficult endeavor. We’re not better at this, we just try to be honest about how hard this is. We see marriage in all its stages and forms, beginnings and endings, as a lens through which we better understand and incorporate God’s grace into our lives. Not that it is never broken or ended among us, but that even its brokenness finds an opportunity for us to do the things we long to do - to live together, to set one another free, and to participate in God’s mending of the universe.

Amen.