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Mark 10:2-16
Genesis 2:18-24
Psalm 8
Hebrew 1:1-4;2:5-12

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The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Let me start with a confession most of you already know. I have been divorced and I have remarried. I have looked upon my friends and neighbors who have been in life-long marriages with a bit of envy and awe. I have wished over and over that I could have been like them. That my children never had to live through divorce. That I never had to go through the pain of realizing my marriage was over. That I never had to start completely over with no home to my name, not enough money to get by, and not enough hours in the day to do the work that two people used to share.

My life didn't turn out the way I had planned...at least I thought so at the time. Instead, at the time, I could only look at my neighbors in happy 40 or 50 year marriages and read this text from Mark and feel like an absolute failure. I felt like I failed my faith, my family, and myself.

But I also knew there was no other decision to make. No other decision to protect myself and my children. No other decision than to live without fear and doubt and instability.

I tell you that to simply let you know that I have personally wrestled with this text from Mark for years. And, this week, I think I have finally found some answers that I desperately needed...and maybe you've been looking for answers as well. What I have come to realize is that our text in Mark is ultimately about human flourishing – not blame and shame. It's about our ability to uphold our relationships with respect and integrity, not constrict us to rigid requirements that perpetuate dishonor and disregard.

Taken a face value, does this text from Mark mean that we are to stay in unhealthy relationships? No, it doesn't. Does it mean we are to stay in destructive or abusive relationships? Absolutely not. This text isn't a definitive statement of a binding marriage vow. Instead, it's a statement about our best intentions, our desire for love and companionship, our hope for a fulfilling life in partnership with another human being. It's a personal statement, not a communal directive.

Look closely at Jesus' conversation. When the Pharisees come to him they ask their questions broadly with generalized terms. Jesus, they say, is it lawful *for a man* to divorce his wife? Moses allowed *a man* to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her. Jesus picks up on their generalization and points the question right back to them as individuals...What did Moses command *you*? Because of *your* hardness of heart he wrote this commandment *for you*. Jesus wants the Pharisees to look at their own intentions and motivations when it comes to relationships, not generalized, blanket statement directives.

And then Jesus goes on to reference Genesis and the creation story. That two people were brought together to be companions in this world. To live in mutual respect and equality. To nurture one another. To be partners. God's best intentions were to create an opportunity for two people to join together in wholeness. God's vision didn't include pain and suffering. It didn't include abuse and neglect. It didn't include infidelity. It didn't include apathy. Or to say it another way...it didn't include the things that bring us to divorce.

In fact, whoever walks down the aisle with anything but the best of intentions? But, life doesn't always follow our good intentions. And marriages fall apart for so many reasons.

When Jesus was talking to the Pharisees, he was recognizing some of these reasons. At the time, a man could leave a woman and their children without fault. In leaving, the women and children would be left destitute. They had no voice, no resources, no way to reclaim what had been taken from them.

Jesus, in his constant vision to bring about more love, more compassion, more justice he redefines the parameters of divorce so that no one could be left struggling to survive. It is a much larger vision of wholeness than had ever been outlined before. And he asks the Pharisees directly, individually, what are you commanded to do to uphold the wholeness of another human being? That's the point of our reading.

What are we commanded to do?

We are commanded to love one another. That's the intention. Yet, our world is flawed and we are flawed human beings. God understands that. God also understands that no matter how much we may want to love, that circumstances will at times be beyond our control. Sometimes, we may have been the ones to make the bad decisions that led to divorce. Other times, we are the ones having to react to someone's painful choices. Divorce may be the only option. Yet, it certainly was never our intention.

But I want you to hear this...God never wants us to hurt. God never wants us to suffer. God never wants us to be in dangerous and damaging relationships. If the words of Mark were ever used to make you feel guilty, to make you feel like a failure, to make you feel like you let yourself down or let God down...I want you to know that there is simply nothing that can separate us from God's love. Especially not divorce.

If God's beautiful intention with creation was and is wholeness, then when that wholeness is broken God embraces us to help us build our lives back up. God welcomes us to him and reminds us that there is hope after sadness. There is grace after guilt. There is forgiveness after failure.

Above all, it is because of God's intention for our wholeness that we find strength and courage to make the choices that we must make at times. It is because of God's love for us that we can indeed believe in the kind of love that we all deserve. That's the message of Mark. We start with the best of intentions always remembering that no matter what life may bring God will be there to take us in his arms, lay his hands on us and bless us.

Amen.