

## “Divorce Dilemma”

So a minister asks a group of children just how long people are supposed to remain married. A child answers: 16 years! When the minister's face looks rather dumbfounded, the child goes on to explain, “4 better, 4 worse, 4 richer, and 4 poorer. It adds up to 16!”

It is good to have a bad joke after the gospel reading about divorce—for the good news leaves a bad feeling for half of the people gathered here this morning. Fifty percent of Christian marriages end in divorce and this text leaves many in silent tears with feelings of abandonment and failure. The reasons for divorce may have been one of the three A's: adultery, addiction or abuse; but the pain is the same. The death of a marriage is always painful.

In the time of Jesus divorce was a fact. However, the justification for divorce was highly debated. The Pharisees who asked Jesus the question “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” could have been followers of Shammai who held that a man may only divorce his wife for a serious transgression, or they could have been followers of Hillel who allowed divorce for even trivial offenses, such as burning a meal. “You burnt my toast—your toast.”

And those where the days when women were property and the marriage deal was between two men: the groom and the father-in-law. So basically the question the Pharisees are asking is “when a man discovers his chattel is defective or no longer desirable can he return it and get his money back?”

What a question! It wouldn't be so bad if only the Pharisees asked it. But then when they get back to the house the disciples continue the conversation. “Uh Jesus, we have left everything to follow you and become more spiritual. Can we divorce our wives?”

It was bad enough that on the way there they were arguing about who was the greatest, now they ask this? What's going on with these disciples?

Well, not much has changed in two thousand years. We have only been the United Church of Canada for four score and four years, but it seems we have spent more time arguing about marriage than feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, and following Jesus.

In 1962, after considerable debate, the United Church of Canada affirmed that marriage is intended to be life-long. However, there will be cases where, in the spirit of Christ, it is in the best interests of all the persons involved (including the children and society) that a marriage be dissolved by divorce. The United Church of Canada further believes that those whose marriage has been dissolved by divorce, be allowed to remarry with the blessing of the church. Before this we didn't marry divorced people.

I can still remember, as a young student minister, visiting a parishioner who was no longer attending church. He had left for two reasons: the church quit using the King James Bible (the one that Jesus used) and we were now encouraging divorce. I failed in my attempt to get him to return.

Did you happen to notice, that after the disciples argued about who was the greatest (the story last week, gospel reading two weeks ago) and (today's gospel reading) the disciples questions about divorced, that Jesus used the same object lesson? Listen and see if there is something in common.

First after the question “who is the greatest?”

“He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever

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welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” (Mark 9:35–37 NRSV)

Second the question, “Can I get rid of my wife?”

“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.” (Mark 10:13–16 NRSV)

Jesus pointed out that the story of God begins with a man and a woman and in marriage they become one flesh. That is the first Bible story. The last Bible story is a vision “And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more...[divorce will be no more] ”(Revelation 21:2–4 NRSV)

Today is World Communion Sunday when the mirror is held up to our face and if ever there was a relationship that has gone very very wrong, then it is not simply marriages—but the relationship between races, between tribes, between genders, between sexual orientations, between the haves and the have not’s. If God’s idea had been for us all to live on this planet in some sort of marriage, enjoying each others’ differences and getting richer for the two becoming one, then God must be heartbroken by the divorce that has resulted. Talk about adultery! We prefer the company of money, drugs, and cyber realities to the company of each other! We are not only divorced from each other we are divorced from God.

So today we let the children back into the house, for Jesus encourages multigenerational gatherings. We prepare a table for a wedding feast, for it is at this table that the church (the bride) becomes one flesh with Jesus (the groom). And through the broken bread and our broken relationships, we hold onto the promise that

we become one in Christ. And he takes us in his arms, love us and blesses us.