

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 3, 2021  
First Lutheran Church  
St. Joseph, MO  
Pastor Keith Hohly

Grace and Peace to you this day in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

There are fewer passages of scripture harder for many of us to hear than the words we hear today as Jesus speaks of divorce.

I pastor I know tells of a young woman who greeted her at the church door after the morning service one Sunday saying that she wanted to talk with her about the Bible. What she specifically wanted to talk about was how she felt about the hurtful nature of these words on divorce. She had been so hurt and angry at the reading of scripture that morning that she had left the sanctuary and spent the remainder of the service in the narthex, thumbing through a Bible, looking for words of affirmation and acceptance despite her divorced status. With eyes that showed fear and frustration, as well as hurt and anger, she asked her pastor: “Am I welcome here or not? I really need to know?”

Her pastor tried to assure her that, yes, she was most welcome as part of Christ’s church. She told her that God’s love is always stronger than God’s anger, that God’s grace is the final word for us, not God’s judgment. Hearing this helped the young woman somewhat, but a good bit of the hurt and anger remained. This pastor I know says she wishes she could report that this woman really heard the words of grace and acceptance, but her sporadic participation in their congregation suggests a continuing struggle.

One of the things that strikes me about this gospel we hear today is that we cannot escape its judgment. Nothing can really be said to blunt the sharpness of Jesus’ words. God’s intention for marriage is clear. It is a binding not meant to be undone. Divorce does not fix things when a relationship becomes broken. Further, the effects of broken relationships remain with us, even when we move on to new relationships. These things we all know – either from our own experience or in our experiences within our families and circle of friends.

But it also strikes me that not a single one of us can escape the scope of God’s judgment in terms of our relationships with one another. Yes, this text today focuses on the issue of marriage and divorce, but taking into consideration all the other things Jesus commands us to do in our relationships with each other, we quickly understand the truth of the words that say we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. For who among us truly loves and prays for all our enemies? Who among us always offers the other cheek when we are struck? Who among us truly resists ever being angry with other people when we experience their trespasses against us? The truth is that all of us sin in our relationships with one another. All of us are guilty when the light of God’s judgment is brought to bear upon our living. The truth is we all fail to live up to the measure that Jesus places before us in our relationships with one another, and not only have we failed in the past, we will continue to fail into the future. Faced with such a candid and scathing assessment, we could all ask of ourselves the same question a young, divorced woman asked of her pastor: “Are we really welcome here or not?” If we only hear God’s judgment of us in answering this question, then we will likely wonder if we actually are.

But there is more to the gospel text we hear today than only the word of judgment. Jesus’ words about divorce and remarriage are quickly followed by his embrace and blessing of the children who were brought to him. This embrace and blessing is the very thing we all seek from God, and in our experience of God’s judgment of us, what we fear is the absence of such a welcome. In being judged and found guilty, we fear that God will not embrace and bless us.

But there is a message in this blessing of the children that I believe each of us regardless of our age is intended for us to hear in our experience of our own failings with one another. Jesus uses these children as an example for us: “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” In his words on divorce and remarriage, he chastises us for our hardness of heart – for our unwillingness and inability to live with each other as God our creator intends for us to live. But now, as he blesses the children, he calls us to be like them. In the pain and suffering of our broken and failed relationships, as we experience the reality and weight of our own guilt, the way to find the embrace and blessing of God is through receiving it as a child. That’s the grace that is being held out to us this day. Jesus doesn’t bless these children because they are perfect. He doesn’t bless them because they are sinless. He embraces and blesses them simply for who they are. He embraces and blesses them because that is what he chooses to do. And they receive it simply because it is being offered to them.

James Fowler, in his book *Stages of Faith*, records an interview with a ten-year-old named Millie who describes how she understands the work of God. “My friend,” she said, “had a puppy and he got ran [sic] over. And she was so mad. And she says, ‘I hate God, I hate God!’ And I go, you know, that you shouldn’t say that, ‘cause God works in mysterious ways. And you never know what’s going to happen next. And neither does he.”

The interviewer then asked Millie if this is always the best thing. “It’s always the best thing,” she responded. “Because if that puppy didn’t die, then you know, you never know what would have happened next. And usually what God does is the best thing.”

“Usually?” the interviewer asked. Millie said, “Most of the time. All the time.” “Which one?” the interviewer pressed her. “All the time,” Millie clarified. “All the time he does the best thing he thinks is best for us.”

“How does he know what’s best?” the interviewer then asked her. “Well,” she said, “it’s like your parents. They think they know what’s best for you and so they try to do what they think is right. So that’s what God does. And usually it turns out that he – what he does is the right thing.”

Are we welcome here or not? Are God’s arms open to us – to embrace us and bless us? Jesus tells us that they are – and he’s asking us to trust this, even in the midst of the unresolved brokenness of our living. To simply receive what is being offered to us – that’s the way we enter the embrace of God’s kingdom and it is this embrace we are being called to take into the world.