

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
The Rev. George Arceneaux
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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There are Sundays in which the Gospel clearly provides a word of comfort. Sundays where we are invited to relax as Jesus invites us to forget our fears. There are Sundays with Gospel readings that may feel as soothing as a warm bath as we hear of the poor's blessedness and the kingdom of heaven promised to the meek. Alas, this is not one of those Sundays.

Though we admittedly have that delightful image of Christ-honoring children and their goodness, I find it hard to focus on this imagery when it is preceded by Jesus' words about divorce. The apparent harshness with Jesus speaks about divorce is hard to reconcile with those accounts of divorce that I suspect we have each heard of or experienced: stories of a marriage ending because the relationship fails to be life-giving for either partner or those stories which are even more heart-wrenching of abuse in the marriage. And Jesus doesn't seem to think about these possibilities in a marriage. Or does he?

I think it's helpful to remember that Jesus' words are a reaction to the Pharisees who have a pretty rotten stance on divorce. The Pharisees basically quote scripture kinda for the sake of quoting scripture in order to test Jesus and they do so with a law that basically allows a husband to divorce his spouse, without his spouse's consent. And the Pharisees, they quote this without thinking about marriage at all. And that's what Jesus reacts to. Jesus reacts to their total inconsideration of marriage, of how marriage is about a relationship between two complexes, wonderfully created people.

If we hear Jesus as kind of intense as he talks about divorce and marriage, it is because he is responding with intensity to the apathy, to the hard-heartedness of those Pharisees who truly couldn't care a lick about the wellbeing of people who are actually married.

And Jesus throws scripture from Genesis right back at the Pharisees, and as he does so, he means to show how important the lives are of those who are married. Jesus announces God's hope for married partners, that they become unified, that each person's joy and needs are known and held by their partner. Jesus refuses the shallow way in which the Pharisees discuss divorce, and Jesus acknowledges the humanness of married couples and acknowledges the seriousness of that commitment. And in talking about the seriousness of marriage, the importance of each life in that partnership, I think Jesus is continuing that great commandment that we are to love the Lord thy God with all thy might and soul and heart and love thy neighbor as thyself. Those who are married are to acknowledge one another's' needs and individuality in the particular relationship of marriage, but this is just one of so many instances in which we are called to care for others.

While Jesus speaks about marriage here, this reading fits into that larger call from Jesus that we consider the everyday demands of our relationships, the needs of those for whom we care. Just as those in marriage need to acknowledge the other person's needs, we need to consider how we care for each person we know or encounter. So while Jesus' words today appear harsh, I think

they speak to the important reminder that we have a responsibility to those whom we love. So may we honor the commitments we have to those for whom we care. Amen.