

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

One of the annoyances of my vocation as pastor in a liturgical church is that every year I have to deal with some version of today's Gospel reading. Actually, it's not the text itself that is the real problem; it's the way we have tended to use this teaching of Jesus in the history of the church. This teaching of Jesus here about divorce is so clear: anyone who divorces their spouse commits adultery. That's pretty straightforward. No ifs, ands, or buts. If you're scouring the Bible for rules to follow, it's hard to miss that one. But there are other rules that seem equally clear to me. There are a whole bunch of them in Matthew chapter five: there Jesus says that having desire for someone who is not your spouse is also committing adultery. And yet that kind of desire is built into our economy. "Sex sells," as we know. It's why YouTube keeps wanting me to click on videos of young women in revealing clothing. It's why we have restaurants like Hooters. But there are other clear rules in Matthew five: anger, says Jesus, carries the same judgment as murder. Yet anger is a staple of our politics these days. Political speeches whip up the fears and resentments of their audiences to vote the "bad guys" out and the "good guys" in. Jesus also says, do not resist evil: if someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to them the other one. If someone takes your coat, give them your cloak as well. And give to everyone who begs from you. All of these are clear, straightforward rules right out of the mouth of Jesus, and yet none of them has been so strictly applied as this teaching of Jesus on divorce, and none of them has been used to shame people the way Jesus' teaching on divorce has.

But besides the issue of our selectiveness, there is also the issue of how we understand and read the Bible. Of particular interest is how we treat the laws of the Bible. And Lutheran theology has a particular take on this. I'm teaching about this in a course for the synod at the moment. One of the key insights of Martin Luther and his colleagues was that we shouldn't use the Bible as a collection of rules to follow, as if by following them we would make ourselves right with God. Instead, they taught, the laws of the Bible, and particularly these rules of Jesus that I just listed, show us how we have *failed* to live up to God's good intentions for us. Jesus summed up all the laws into two: love God and love your neighbor, and he showed us that we can't even follow these. This means, said Luther, that the law always accuses us. So instead of making the rule about divorce more lenient, Jesus makes all of the laws even harder to follow, so that in the end we are forced to recognize, as we confessed first thing this morning, that we are in captivity to sin and cannot free ourselves. That confession drives us into the open arms of Jesus and his mercy and forgiveness. The mistake of the church in the past regarding divorce is not in calling divorce sinful, but in singling it out as a much greater sin than almost any other, and not allowing that sometimes divorce is the lesser of evils, and that it requires not our scorn but our compassion, and our trust in God's love and forgiveness as the source of our hope for the future.

All that needed to be said for the reasons I just laid out. But having said all that, I will now say that this Gospel text today is not really ultimately about divorce, but about the deeper attitude and orientation revealed by those coming to test Jesus. They're coming with this particular question because this was the issue that got John the Baptist killed. John had been criticizing Herod for marrying his brother's wife, and that's why she schemed to have him killed. The Pharisees want to get rid of Jesus, so they're hoping he will take the bait and maybe make the same criticism of Herod. That would solve all of their problems. But Jesus doesn't bite. Instead, he asks them what the law is, and they tell him that Moses allowed divorce. Jesus does

not dispute this, but then shows how this technically legal thing is actually a result of the people's lack of trust in God and that it runs counter to God's intentions for humankind. In other words, Moses gave them a loophole, and Herod wants to use that loophole, but John the Baptist got in the way.

We are very familiar with loopholes in our time and place. Special interests lobby legislators who write special laws to allow them to pay less tax than they're supposed to pay or be subject to less regulation than the law intends. And so it becomes legal for them to shirk their responsibilities and shift some of their burden on everyone else. But as we know, what is legal is not always right. And that's Jesus' point with the Pharisees. Their question is about what is legal rather than what is right. "What can I get away with?"

Jesus wants to flip the question away from self-interest to the common good. It's not what we can get to work for ourselves, but what aligns with God's good intentions for all of us that should be our ultimate concern. In the social setting of the Gospels, a man's ability to divorce his wife simply because she displeased him, put the woman in a difficult position. If she did not have family to fall back on, she would be without income and without a home. So Jesus' strictness here is actually good news. It means that God cares for the vulnerable, and cares that we not make one another vulnerable. It means that God will not give up on God's good intentions for us or for the rest of creation, even when things go bad because of our sin. The way forward is not in loopholes and concessions, but in repentance and forgiveness, in dying to our sin and rising to new and redeemed life. Only Jesus can get us through that journey by his own death and resurrection. And so it is to Jesus that we must turn.

And that is the point of the last section in our Gospel reading, which at first glance might seem to be completely disconnected from the first part. To get what's going on here it's important to understand that the view of children in the ancient world was very different from ours. Of course, people loved their own children just as we do, but in general children were regarded not as sweet and innocent, but as burdens: those who consumed resources without being able to share the workload. They were the lowest of the low, who were completely dependent on others for their survival. And that is just what makes them perfect for the kingdom of God, according to Jesus. Not their sweetness, not their innocence, but their dependence. Exactly the opposite of Herod, the powerful king looking for loopholes and refusing to acknowledge his responsibility to care for others, or to recognize his dependence upon anyone else, including God.

So, it turns out that this passage that I dread preaching on every time it comes around is not the disastrously bad news for some that we expect it to be. Nor is it turning a blind eye to others, as we might also expect. Jesus' ultimate point here is that all of us are equally dependent upon God's love, mercy, and forgiveness. The bad news that none of us can live up to God's good intentions for us, that all of us fall short of the glory of God and are in need of God's help, leads to the truly good news that in Jesus we have that help, and in him God welcomes us with open arms as children of God and heirs of God's coming kingdom. That unconditional love and forgiveness transforms our lives and opens our hearts to the world that God so deeply loves in Jesus Christ, to make us agents and ambassadors of God's coming reign even and especially in difficult times like ours. May we take that good news to heart, trusting its life-giving promise for Jesus' sake. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, and direct our days and our deeds. Amen.