

All of us have experience with divorce, that dissolution of marriage relationships, the relationships that are supposed to be life-long, constant, faithful, joyful. In our families or extended families there are experiences to remember, if not experiences within our own lives.

Two people in the church I attended as a child, much admired and respected, announced that they were getting a divorce. The children were older, in college. The boy, Larry, my friend, was deeply disturbed by the news and blamed his father. What I chiefly remember, though, was the way that this news came as a kind of seismic shock wave rolling through the equanimity of the church; upsetting all sorts of assumptions and norms. People felt that this should not happen to Christians. That Christians should be above divorce. Sometimes I think that they worried more about protecting their assumptions of church life than caring about the reality of the people involved and what was happening to them.

I believe I mentioned earlier that my grandfather divorced my grandmother later in their lives. He moved out and stayed in town. The couple had two daughters. The older one and her husband reacted negatively with punitive anger on the husband's part. The husband blamed his father in law and forbade him to come to the family home. That cut off my grandfather from relating to his grandson, my cousin. My grandfather stood in the rain, during football games, watching my cousin who played both ways in high school, watching my cousin from the sidelines, his only avenue of contact. In contrast, my mother and father decided upon love. They blamed no one. They welcomed both of my mother's parents into the home of my childhood and I am deeply grateful for the contact that that hospitality provided. Later my grandfather lived with us while I was in high school.

If you are living with divorce, either your own or the divorce of someone close to you, I know that this text in particular comes up, once in every three years or so, with the potential to cause great heart-ache. In this text, Jesus condemns divorce as adulterous. In Matthew, he provides for divorce as a potential option following unfaithfulness. And in Corinthians, Paul allows divorce to proceed if one member of a marital union becomes a Christian believer and the partner wishes to end the union as a result.

But what about other cases that disturb the marital relationship? What about indifference, lack of respect, lack of any sense of partnership and mutuality? What about outright denigration and disregard between partners or verbal, sexual or physical abuse, or contrived arrangements to control or isolate one person by the other?

Our text from Genesis this morning, happily presents the other side of relationship between men and women-- a relationship that comes to provide community. The imagery is personal and intimate. The man and the woman share one flesh and become one flesh. They become united, their lives fused and intertwined together. But when this marriage relationship becomes assailed by constant disregard, by acrimony, by denigration of one by the other; when the relationship becomes poisoned, toxic -- what kind of one flesh exists? What kind of harmony, community, partnership persists?

As I see things, the church, in its many and diverse traditions, has made three responses. Ultra-conservative churches appear to want to honor the texts from Mark and Matthew to the exclusion of the people involved. Divorce, they say, is wrong in all circumstances. This view seals people in toxic relationships that become destructive in one form or another as people endure and often become less than they should be. This is not to say that marriage should be dissolved at the first sign of difficulty. Marriage should be taken seriously and honored. Indeed we live in an age when marriage needs to be defended. But when the church forbids people to face the realities of their relationships because even toxic marriages need to be preserved at all costs, I wonder about the health and the well being --mind, body and soul--of the people involved.

In a second approach, the Roman Catholic church desires to separate the legal realm of marriage and the spiritual side of marriage and --in an apparent effort to respond to the two texts in the Gospels-- has developed the concept of annulment. This allows the church to potentially say in a given case that the marital relationship, spiritually never existed. Rather than divorce, the church has reserved the capability to annul marriages saying that true marriages, even with children, never spiritually existed. Both persons involved do not have to agree to an annulment

proceeding for it to proceed. The church states that an annulment does not make the children involved illegitimate. But how does one feel as a child of such a relationship annulled in a proceeding by the Church?

And then there is a third possibility --- the possibility that individuals caught in the throes of divorce can actually move past divorce, acknowledge the pain and the events of divorce, assess, grieve, explore-- and heal.

Quite often these days, I find myself, when engaged in free prayer, beginning my prayer with the phrase, *Gracious and loving God*. I do not begin with *God of severity and judgment*, *distant God*, *vindictive God*. No. We proclaim a God of love. A God of proximity and not one of distance. A God of patience, of kindness, of forbearance. A God of forgiveness. A God of healing love and liberating power.

Not all texts in the Bible are equal. Some texts are greater than others. Some are more universal. Some are possessed of greater truth. Yesterday, sixteen people came out to Badger Camp for a mini-retreat and in the midst of our Taize service of worship which began our time together, Claire Holland read one of my favorite texts -- one which I believe is more universal; one which I believe is possessed of greater truth.

She read: *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away. See, everything has become new! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them....*

No matter where we are caught in the difficulties of life, no matter where we have erred or strayed or disobeyed or disregarded, something exists beyond these things and that something is the new creation. And that is why we seek forgiveness. In Jesus, in relationship with Jesus, there is the power to make all things new. The power to heal. The power to go forward. The power to say from deep within -- *See, everything has become new!* Everything.

Jesus is living water. Jesus is new creation. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Jesus is the bread of life. Jesus sets the captives free. Jesus opens the eyes of the blind. Jesus writes with his finger in the sand until all of the woman's accusers melt away. Jesus is the way that God reconciles us to God's very self.

See, everything has become new!

In the name of God-- Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.