

Genesis 2:18-22

Psalm 8

Mark 10:2-16

Nineteenth Sunday after Whitsunday

October 4th 2015

On more than one occasion in the King's Chapel Book of Common Prayer instructs the minister to recite “Comfortable Words”. At Holy Communion or at the Burial of the Dead, the minister recites sentences of scripture that are, in a sense, comfortable. Words typically of Jesus, but also from Paul or other sources of scripture, that tell of God's love for us, the rest we receive in God, the peace given unto us. Words that for some of us, are written on our hearts—that we turn to in times of struggle or heartache:

“Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”¹

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.”²

“Though this body be destroyed, yet shall I see God.”³

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”⁴

You know these sentences, these comfortable words, the Bible is full of them. And time and time again, when I have been called to the bedside of the ailing, or comfort those who grieve, I am asked to read ‘those comfortable words’.

But you and I also know, the Bible is full of “uncomfortable” words. Verses and words that when read alone or at face value, appear hurtful, heart-wrenching, confusing.

“She shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death.”⁵

“As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you.”⁶

¹ Matthew 11:28

² John 14:27

³ Job 19:26

⁴ Psalm 23

⁵ Deuteronomy 22:21

⁶ Leviticus 25:44-46

“Happy shall they be who take your little ones, their children, and dash them against the rock!”⁷

Those are from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, and for some that makes it okay to ignore, or deny. But there are many times in the New Testament when Jesus gives us uncomfortable words.

In our reading this morning, the Pharisees and the disciples ask Jesus about divorce. And Jesus gives an answer that is uncomfortable, painful, and distressing. You heard it. He said it not once, but twice. Uncomfortable words that cause us to pause and ask 'Did Jesus get it wrong?'

Sometimes we hear things in the Bible and I imagine many of us think, “Ahhh, well, that was a long time ago. Nobody thinks that way anymore.” And perhaps that is true, but what I know for sure, is that over the years, Jesus’ words about divorce have kept people in bad marriages they should have left. But they didn’t leave because of this passage.

I also know that in the past people have been excluded from the life of the church because they were divorced, and as a result, persons whole families left their church, their faith.

So no matter what you think about this passage, there is no doubt that it has given power to those who seek to condemn and caused a lot of pain. So we can’t skip over this text or else we run the risk of it continuing to inflict pain.

It is no secret that marriage today looks quite different than marriage during the time of Jesus or earlier. In that same way, divorce looks quite different today than it did during the time of Jesus.

Women were viewed as property. Marriage was a means to acquire property. For a man to marry a woman there was an exchange of property between the woman’s father, brother, or even son, and the man who was going to marry her. Exploration of biblical text would show us many guidelines, regulations that explain who a woman belongs to in the event her husband dies. Brothers, brother in-laws, sons. Jesus knew these regulations. He existed in them. Many scholars point to Jesus final moments on the cross, he turns to his mother and a disciple standing by and says “Woman, behold your son.” and the scripture goes on to say the disciple took Mary into home.⁸ An exchange of property. Jesus as the head of his household, handing his mother over to another male.

For the most part, women held no financial power, very little rights or autonomy. They were property. And because they were property without legal standing, the man is the one who had the power to divorce. Notice the Pharisees question: *Is it lawful for a **man** to divorce his wife?* The religious

⁷ Psalm 137

⁸ John 19:27

regulations of the day left much room for a wide interpretation of grounds of divorce. And for the woman there was no fighting it.

Divorce was particularly devastating in those days. It almost always meant public disgrace for the woman, grace financial struggles for the woman (she would have no assets, no money, no home), and a severely limited future for her *and* her children. She was rejected from society. Survival was more difficult than it already was.

The Pharisees ask Jesus a simple yes-or-no question: *Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?* And the simple answer Jesus gives is *yes*. But Jesus doesn't want divorce to be a cold, legal question. He wants it to be a relational question. What impact does it have on those people involved? Is it good for everyone or does it leave someone out on the streets and hungry? The women or children. Notice what Jesus says to his disciples. He said, "Whoever divorces his wife and married another commits adultery against *her*." If a woman was just property then, when a man committed adultery, he didn't commit it against his wife, he committed it against his wife's father or brother—whoever held her as property before the marriage. But Jesus says it is committed against *her*. Jesus is lifting the woman out of the status of property to the status of person—let me say that a different way—Jesus is pointing to the already existing reality that a woman is a human, a person, worthy of dignity and status. And then Jesus takes it one further and says, "If a woman divorces her husband..." That was unheard of! Women had no legal standing, but Jesus expands the law and says, "Yes, yes they can." Women are equal to men. He flips the Pharisees question on its head. He turns societal notions upside down. Lifts up the vulnerable and powerless.⁹

Let me be sure to say, this text is still uncomfortable. Words very uncomfortable. It takes more study, more care. But that's what we do with scripture, we don't laugh it off or change it, or skip over it, no the stakes are too high. We read it, ingest it, wrestle with it, contextualize it. Jesus isn't giving a law to live by, in which people cannot be divorced, or remarry. I don't believe that is the point of our scripture this morning. I think Jesus is once again turning our focus away from following the rules and towards being concerned for the most vulnerable among us. Jesus is always on the side of those who are most vulnerable, seeking to give them back their humanity.

Through careful study of the words we find that Jesus raises up women as human beings and not property to be passed around. It is no accident that after Jesus is questioned on divorce, we find the story of Jesus welcoming children. His disciples were concerned, fearful. Children weren't viewed as cute, innocent, and angelic. They were viewed as animals, not fully human, useless, poor, dirty, carrying illness and disease. But then Jesus takes these children, these rejected ones, and put his arms around them, blessed them, and says that the kingdom of God belongs to them.

⁹ Indebted to the thoughts and works of Rev. Jonathan Davis, Lutheran Minister

You see, throughout the Gospels, Jesus is not concerned with following the rules or what might be legal. He is concerned for the most vulnerable among us; reminding us of their dignity, welcoming them in, flinging wide the gates of the kingdom of God. His priority, which is God's priority, is to bring Good News and unending love to those whom society has turned away from.

Perhaps this text isn't about divorce at all, at least not in our own context. But it's about Jesus turning our attention to those whom society has rejected, keeps away, those whom the church has rejected, keeps away. Jesus asks us to examine our structures, our laws, our relationships, our world and recognize who has power, and who does not.

There are still many questions, still uncomfortable notions and words, hurtful notions and words in our reading this morning. And perhaps after this service, we tuck away this reading and don't revisit it for another three years when it arrives again in our calendar of readings.

But my hope is this: that we push aside ancient and closed minded understandings of this text and other texts like it, push aside the perspectives and thoughts of those who use scripture as a sword, as a weapon, as a means to keep some in and some out. And begin again to read our scripture, even the uncomfortable words, as a means to lift up those who have been pushed down, empower those who have their power stripped, and encounter those who sit on the margins of our society.

Because it is then, only then, when we begin to realize and enact the radical love of God made alive in words and deeds of Jesus Christ. + Thanks be to God. Amen.