

“The Lord Blesses You”

How many of you have sometime in your life started a new job that you were optimistic about only to have it turn out terribly? Here is another scenario, how many of you have had a friend that you thought would be your BFF only to grow apart or even worse have a falling out? Lastly, this is the hardest, how many of you have had a romantic relationship that you thought was true love, your soul mate, the one person you could not live without only to end up brokenhearted?

All of these are disappointments, but I think the last one, a broken relationship may be the hardest to bear especially if it is marriage where we commit to each other for life. I do not think we get married thinking it is something they are just trying on to see if it fits. I do not think that in the back of a couple’s minds is the idea, “well if it doesn’t work out, we can get divorced.”

Additionally, we have the religious and societal expectations that come from Holy Scripture. Even if you are not particularly religious our culture is permeated with the Adam and Eve story and Jesus’ prohibition against divorce. As we heard just minutes ago, when none of the animals and birds God creates are a suitable companion for the Man God makes a companion out of the body of the Man. Furthermore, the scripture reads, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” That is incredibly powerful language. When two become one flesh how can they be rent asunder without incredible pain?

Jesus’ teaching on divorce is hard and some might say unforgiving. Certainly, the Church writ large has taken this statement to heart for two thousand years. Some traditions still prohibit divorce, and others only accept it on the most extreme circumstances. Indeed, for centuries Jesus’ teaching has been misused to keep people, especially women, in marriages that were loveless, abusive, and even fatal. This could not have been further from what many scholars, pastors, and I believe Jesus intended.

Jesus’ teaching was strict because he was confronting a society where men were granted the power to divorce or dismiss a wife almost whimsically. It was the husband’s prerogative to write a letter of dismissal, give it to his wife, and send her on her way. Indeed, some ancient writers tell us that a man could divorce a woman for cooking a bad meal, or simply because he did not find her pleasing any more. Imagine, finding yourself sent home to your parents or out on the street because dinner was overcooked, or you had put on a few pounds. In ancient Israel it was not as if she could head off to the temp agency, go back to school to retrain, or take up a career she had retired from to marry and become a homemaker. Indeed, it was not all that long ago that a divorced woman’s options in this country were similarly dim.

Jesus’ tough teaching is about protecting the sanctity of marriage. He is demanding that people get married with their eyes wide open. He wants couples to make wise decisions about getting married knowing that they are in it for the long haul—for better or for worse, in sickness and health, “until death do us part.” It is tough stuff, but Jesus was not one for backing down from the tough demands of life for convenience or expedience. Jesus opposes heartless actions that jeopardize the powerless and the vulnerable whether they are poor, orphaned, widows, children or women treated callously by their husbands.

Likewise, Jesus would never have condemned someone for being divorced. Remember in the Gospel of John where he encounters a Samaritan woman at the well.

This woman had previously been married to five different men and was living with a man not her husband. We do not know if she was widowed five times or divorced five times or some combination thereof. What we do know is that Jesus did not condemn her.¹ Also in the Gospel of John Jesus did not condemn a woman caught in adultery,² despite the desire of the crowd for him to do so.³

Jesus was always about forgiveness. Jesus would never have wanted an abused spouse to stay in a marriage because of his teaching. Jesus would never have wanted a couple to stay together who could not stand the sight of one another. Jesus would not have wanted a marriage to stay together “until death do us part” if one of the partners was going to be responsible for the death of the other in body or in soul.

What’s more Jesus knows the toll divorce takes on people. Even in an amicable divorce there is much pain. There are regrets, feelings of failure, loss of family and friends, loss of dreams and hopes, not to mention the legal and property ramifications. Divorce is life altering and very hard. I believe that Jesus is as hopeful as any starry-eyed couple. I also believe that Jesus weeps when that starry-eyed couple’s dream and love die. It is only with Jesus’ help that we can get through those dark, dark days that come with the end of any meaningful relationship, especially marriage.

Jesus blesses us when we are happy. Jesus blesses us if we are trying to make a go of it against all odds. Jesus blesses us if our dreams are dying. Jesus blesses us if we are divorced or divorcing and hurt in ways that no one was ever meant to hurt. Jesus blesses us if we are single by circumstance or choice. Jesus blesses us.

Later in today’s reading Jesus speaks of his love and care for children. We are all children of God. If you have children think how even as they grow to adulthood, they are still your children. Right? That never changes and so it is with God. God wants for each and every one of us the best that life offers. That is what love is.

When life gives us pain and suffering God, just like a good human parent, does not chastise and blame us, but rather comforts and consoles us. It is not by accident that the teaching about children follows the one about divorce. Jesus wants to remind us that it is with the open, humble, warm, and accepting hearts of children that we enter life. So, it also should be when we enter marriage or any relationship. If the relationship fails despite our best efforts, we continue humbly, warmly and accepting into the new life beyond.

They will be those who will not have compassion on us when we fail, but their condemnation does not matter. All that matters is God’s eternal love for each beloved one of us. Remember God commanded Aaron to give a particular blessing to the people, “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” Those are the words of God to remind us that there is nothing we can do, nothing, that will make God stop loving us.

¹ John 4:4-42

² Note the other adulterer, presumably a man, was not brought by the crowd to be punished.

³ John 8:1-11