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The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our God, our strength and our redeemer.

On the surface, the gospel reading we just heard sounds pretty cut and dried. What God has joined together let no one separate, and it goes on to equate re-marriage with adultery. Those words sound very harsh and damning to our ears, especially if one is a divorced person. When interpreted literally these words have caused a lot of angst, grief, hard feelings and misunderstanding. Jesus said what he said, but his words, when placed in cultural context are saying something very different from how they have traditionally been interpreted.

The question put to Jesus is another attempt to get Jesus to trap himself by going against the law as stated in scripture. Note that Jesus is asked about divorce, not marriage, so it has to be taken for granted that divorce was a reality in Jesus time, not just in our world. Jesus is asked if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. When Jesus asks what Moses commanded he is referring back to the book of Deuteronomy, the book of laws, where in chapter 24 the law states that:

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and ¹he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, ² and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, ³ and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, ⁴ then ⁵her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

Whew! That is a mouthful isn't it? When all those words get sorted out, what this really describes is the rules for a re-marriage in a patriarchal society where a woman was considered property and could be set-aside, or divorced if the man didn't like his dinner or his toast was burned. Most often the woman so divorced was turned out with no property or means of support and ended up living in extreme poverty - or was forced to turn to prostitution in order to eat. In ancient times and in Jesus time, the concept of adultery was also a matter of infringing on a man's property rights and lines of heritage.

So these "laws" need to be put in context of the times as well as the context of the question:

everyone appeared to believe that divorce was legal – what was not clear was under what circumstances divorce could occur. When Jesus answers his questioners, he did what Jesus did so well – **he re-framed the question from the law to relationship**. What was God's word on the subject? What is God's desire for God's kingdom?

So Jesus begins to talk about marriage rather than divorce. Looking to the book of Genesis, Jesus talks about God's desire for happy, supportive and mutually beneficial relationships. Jesus words also give place and power to the oppressed – in this case women. Jewish law did not allow women to initiate divorce. Roman law, however, did.

Jesus statement makes it clear that the woman can divorce her husband, thereby leveling the playing field. Jesus is giving women exactly the same rights as men and in doing so he is upholding those seen as being at the bottom of society; the oppressed, the vulnerable and saying that they matter too. They are more than property. These are the statements that turned the society of Jesus time on its ear!

Jesus is demonstrating the good news of the gospel, the news that will change lives – Jesus demonstrates compassion for the downtrodden. And therefore we have the gospel's sudden turn to the children.

Many believe that Jesus, calling for the children not to be excluded, is telling us a heartwarming tale about Jesus love for these innocent little ones - because – well – aren't kids cute and wonderful?

How could we do anything that would keep the cute, cuddly children from Jesus arms? Well, the truth of the matter is that children were as much property as women were. They were seen as inconveniences, a drain on resources – and Jesus stands up for the children, telling us that the kingdom of God is open to those who, like the children, are seen as the least, the most vulnerable. Jesus blessed the children and welcomed them, just as he welcomes us, - in spite of our brokenness and hardness of heart.

The world is turned upside down again! We need to see that alongside being held accountable for God's laws, we are called to be in relationship with God and one another,

to support one another and love one another. This has never been more true than it is today. We have to look no further than our own backyard to see that our world needs to be turned upside down again and we are the ones that need to do the turning. The vulnerable and the oppressed are still with us and need our love and support. The numbers of homeless are growing. Racism and classism has not been overcome. In fact it has only gone underground while some people with a public platform say how far we have come.

There is an obvious lack of respect for human life as violence and deprivation seem to have permeated our society. What is the answer?

How I wish there was a fast and easy fix, and I know that you all wish it as well. Perhaps the best we can do is recognize Jesus message to us. The answer is not the literal interpretation of Jesus words which have been used to make people feel less than, and defeated. God wants to be in relationship with us and realizes that in spite of our desires and efforts, we are human and fall short. But we can strive to love our neighbor, to find ways to make a difference in Jesus name in this world. Wherever you stand on the issues we face today, and there are many, something has to change.

We need to be the hands and feet of Jesus in our time: we need to be the bearers of hope in this crazy world of ours.

As we look to the future here at St. Paul's we are being called to participate in discerning what God is calling us to do and be. It is just possible that we are called to be the hands and feet of Christ in this world, being beacons of God's hope and love –and our task of discernment will lead us to discover the ways in which God is challenging us to use our hands and feet and resources for Christ.

Whatever the future brings us we are called to

develop relationships filled with peace and love, to be messengers of justice, as God, not humans define justice. We can pray for the violence, hatred, lack of love and broken relationships across this earth to cease,

and as stated in the words often attributed to St. Francis – let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me, with us as individuals and with us as the community of the children of God.

We can't fix it all, but we can make a difference as individuals and as the body of Christ in this place and in the community that surrounds this sacred place.

Commit to participate in the discernment process so that the way is found to make a difference.

Let's commit, as the Body of Christ, to being beacons of hope, love and justice. I ask you to bring your time, your talent and your treasure: your energy and your enthusiasm to the mission of God in and through this place; to bring the love of God so alive that there can be no question of who and whose we are,

and that we are living out God's mission every minute of every day. That we are living proof of the justice, love and hope, forgiveness and mercy of our God. Amen.