

Edina Morning Community Church
United Church of Christ
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Sunday, October 4, 2015
Blessed and Broken

This is a challenging text for me. I have been married and divorced, and I have remarried. The fact that I am now in a same-gender marriage only makes the first section of our text even more challenging. Now and through my life's transitions, I feel blessed by God and I firmly believe that Jesus's command to love one another trumps judgment. I did not feel I could do justice to today's text without clearly declaring that I am not impartial when it comes to interpreting today's text.

So let us now address today's text to see if we might even find some compassion and love in it when we read it in context and with the perspective of how the three stories contained in the text may be interconnected and progresses from judgment to love.

In the first story, the Pharisees tested Jesus with the question, *"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"* The purpose of the question was not to have Jesus offer his teachings on divorce. The purpose was to trick Jesus into saying something that would offend. Jesus did not fall for their trick. Jesus instead, addressed the issue of marriage itself by referring back to the story of creation where God created male and female.

Biblical commentator, David B. Howell says: *"Jesus is less concerned about what is allowed and more concerned about what is intended in the kingdom of God."*¹ I certainly agree with Howell in hearing these words of Jesus – *"what God has put together let no one separate"* - as an ideal to be sought after in a marriage, rather than a legalistic prohibition. I believe that all of us today can agree with the ideal that when we choose someone we love to marry, we enter into that marriage with the hope and expectation that it will last throughout our lifetime or even beyond.

In Jesus's time, marriage was basically a financial arrangement similar to the selling of property. It did not have to do with two people choosing each other based on mutual love. Under Jewish law at that time, only the man could divorce his wife, the wife could not divorce her husband. Commentator Howell adds: *"Clearly, Jesus had a pastoral concern for women who could have their lives torn apart by a signature on a piece of paper. In the kingdom of God, there should be mutual respect and concern for each other..."*²

The second story in today's text has Jesus and the disciples moving into the house. We then hear Jesus stating that re-marriage clearly would be considered adultery. Commentator Kate Matthews Huey sheds light onto this second story. She says, *"We know that "in the*

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

*house" is the way Mark records the conversation that was going on in the early church. That observation is confirmed here when Mark has Jesus speaking of something that wasn't practiced in ancient Judaism, a wife divorcing her husband. Mark's church is wrestling with the Greco- Roman culture around them which allowed such things, and that debate is reflected in the way they "record" Jesus' private conversation."*³ Therefore, what is recorded here may not actually be words of Jesus, but rather how the early church understood and interpreted Jesus' words in the their own context.

Our text now progresses to the third story that, once again, involves the presence of children. People are bringing children to Jesus that he might touch them. Disciples try to prevent the children from coming to Jesus. Then Jesus says, "*Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.*" (Mark 10: 14 – 16)

What do we make of this wonderful blessing of children in the midst of this discussion around marriage and divorce? I believe we need to again understand that the children are not just innocent children, but the children represent those who are outcasts and have no standing in society. Is it possible for us to understand, in today's text, that the children might still represent the outcast, and this time representing those who may have previously been considered outcasts because they were divorced and/or because they were divorced and re-married?

I believe that is true and that it is why I said at the beginning the three stories of the text need to be seen as inter-connected and progressive. I believe Jesus is proclaiming that the kingdom of God belongs to all of us. That all of us are broken and all of us are blessed. I believe that when Jesus took the children in his arms and blessed them, he is offering to take each of us in his arms and bless us. I believe that Jesus is powerfully proclaiming that God loves each of us – just as we are. Jesus does not say that we must follow the law in order to enter into the kingdom of God. He says only that we must receive the kingdom of God as a little child – as a little child symbolic of all of the ways in which we feel broken.

As we celebrate World Communion Sunday today, we also recognize our brokenness at the communion table. I treasure this day when Christians join together in one community to celebrate communion. I feel connected to others whom I know are also celebrating communion today. I feel connected to all the others whom I do not know who are also celebrating communion today. I especially feel connected to the many ways in which God's children suffer across the world. That is why I chose the poem "A Table With No Edges" as our second text for today. I love the imagery of our communion table having no edges. Can you imagine this table reaching out all across the world? After bringing into our minds the many ways in which God's children are suffering today, can we imagine being able to affirm these last six lines of the poem: *We will sit down, making friends out of strangers. We will sit down, our cup filled with new wine.*

³ Sermon Seeds October 4, 2015 - United Church of Christ.pdf

We will sit down and let love flow like language. We will sit down where speech needs no words. We will sit together at the table with no edges. We will sit to share one loaf, in Christ's name, in one world. May it be so. Amen.