

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

There are few among us who react well when we're put on the spot. When someone makes an accusation or asks a loaded question, there's not time to think, to meditate in our hearts or to choose the words of our mouth before we reply. It's not a problem if someone is asking a routine question, but sometimes it can turn into a foot-in-the-mouth occasion, or worse. The doctrines of the church are fertile ground for these uncomfortable, embarrassing situations, and can be worse when the questions come right out of scripture.

On his very first Sunday at his very first church, new minister David Howell stood in the church hall during a welcome reception given by the congregation. As a woman approached, he held out his hand to her, thinking she was coming to meet and welcome him. When she asked, "Preacher, do divorced people go to hell?" he was completely caught off guard. She asked twice, and both times he answered with a clever retort that not only failed to answer her question but also failed to acknowledge why she might be asking it. Later, in a much longer encounter with her, Howell learned that her son had recently ended his troubled marriage and planned to remarry. Because of the lessons his mother had heard in church, teachings that were the foundation of her faith, she was convinced her son's soul was at risk. She wasn't trying to test Howell, although it felt that way to him; she was seeking reassurance of God's love for her son, and for herself, too.

That was not the case with these men who asked Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" They *were* trying to trip him up. Through scripture, we know they were his antagonists, always seeking ways to test his credibility, trying to catch him giving false information about scripture and the law. They know the answer before they ask. "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." Surely they also know that the Deuteronomic law they're throwing up to Jesus isn't really about the *legality* of divorce, but about the *grounds* for divorce. By this time in history, in the story of God's people, divorce was a long-accepted practice. The questions these Pharisees asked Jesus required that he take a stand, one way or another, and he was likely to offend someone by what he said, no matter how he answered. Divorce was judged to be sinful, despite the fact that in those days marriage was primarily a legal arrangement, not a sacramental covenant of love as it is for us today. Although it is still judged to be sinful today by many who, like the woman in David Howell's story, have been taught that it is, today at least there is child support and alimony, for some at least. In Jesus' day, women and children didn't matter much, and women were often left to beg in the streets for the simplest necessities of life, including the care of their children.

Even today, in a society where marital breakup is commonplace, it's hard to talk about it without assigning blame and judgment, and of course our legal system promotes that. But if we see divorce as a tragedy that changes lives forever, which it is, blame and judgment should be replaced by sorrow and a healthy dose of forgiveness! The sin in divorce is the hardness of heart that leads to it, and too often continues after the marriage is over. It leaves behind it deeply wounded people with broken dreams, people whose hopes for their lives will be unfulfilled. Have you ever met anyone who entered into marriage with plans to divorce later? Two people who lovingly vow to live together in the covenant of marriage for the remainder of their lives intend to do just that. And that is, of course, God's intent for human beings who are created and loved by God and joined together in God's holy name!

Jesus alludes to this in his answer to those who question him about divorce. He says nothing to condemn a person who is divorced; instead he goes back to the ancient creation story, reminding his listeners of God's vision of ideal human relationship, beginning with the first human beings.

God's desire in creation was for human beings to be in right relationship with God, and with each other. The lifelong commitment made by two people to each other becomes a microcosm of Christian community, where we can learn about being in relationship with others, about ministering to each other, about loving one another in the midst of our unlovability. And anyone who has ever been married certainly knows there are times when we are unlovable! Every one of us. Relationships with other human beings can be the most incredibly wonderful part of our human lives; they can also be the worst. Does that mean that divorced people go to hell? Jesus never said that. Thankfully, through his life, love, and sacrifice, we know that when our human relationships fail, God is still with us—faithful, patient, kind, loving, and forgiving. And, thankfully, God has put before us men and women whose own lives of following Christ demonstrate the knowledge of God's love and the ideal of commitment to God in Christ. Our patron saint, Francis, is one of those.

Today we have the juxtaposition of three opportunities to learn and think about how we are to follow Christ in the twenty-first century in Rutherford County, North Carolina. As we approached this Sunday, I began to feel like a greedy preacher because I didn't want to choose one over another to focus on today. We rarely hear Mark's "divorce" passage because it always falls on St. Francis Sunday, which might be just fine for some; but it does give us an invitation to see divorce through the lens of love and forgiveness instead of guilt and shame. And then we have St. Francis Day, which brings us a fully-human example of living one's life in service for Christ, forsaking a rich and comfortable life to become a steward of God's creation, including not only animals but also other human beings. Stewardship is the third lesson for today, whether it is in our relationships or in our use of what God has given us. In my mind, Francis has something to teach us about each of these three things.

Listen closely to these words from the prayer attributed to St. Francis, which I've modified a bit to help us think more deeply about them. Let us pray:

Lord, make us promoters of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let us be loving;
where there is damage and hurt, let us be quick to forgive;
where there is disagreement and conflict, let us seek understanding and unity;
where there is doubt, let us share faith;
where there is despair, let us bring hope;
where there is darkness, let your light shine brightly through us;
where there is sadness, let us find joy.
Grant that we may not so much seek to receive comfort as to offer comfort.
Grant that we may not so much seek to be understood as to understand;
Grant that we may not so much seek to be loved, as to love.
For it is through our own giving that we receive;
It is in forgiving others that we know forgiveness;
And it is in dying to ourselves that we are born to eternal life.

Remind us, dear Lord, that you have called us to be agents of your peace; help us to follow in the footsteps of our patron, St. Francis, so that like him, our lives may reflect the teachings of our Lord Christ. Help us to remember always that all we are, all we have, and all we do come from your gifts; teach us to consciously and intentionally practice love, forgiveness, mercy and generosity, in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. *Amen.*