

The title for today's message is: "**An Invitation To Community**"

Jesus said: **What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."**

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

My friends, we have a problem. Yes, even as we gather here in God's house to worship, we have a problem. The problem is, "community."

That's right, through our baptism we belong to a worldwide community. That is a community of Christians in faith.

Look, each time we gather together as Christians, we have an opportunity to pray for peace, and to recommit ourselves to God.

Yet, we also have to deal with a troublesome, and potentially divisive part of scripture, right here in our Gospel lesson for today.

Mark begins by saying: ***And Pharisees came up and in order to test him*** (Meaning Jesus) ***asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"***

Well Jesus response has always put peace-loving Christians to the test. Many people who hear this question snarl at it, like animals do when their threatened.

Yet, others grow angry because it causes them to truly address the issue of divorce, that is, in a spiritual way.

While others simply cross their fingers, and hope for the best. Hoping the next time they encounter this question its simply overlooked.

You see they believe anyone who divorces are damned, especially those who re-marry. They say its because of this, family life is out of control today.

So, its no wonder pastors especially today avoid this text. I remember one pastor who said, "I have a congregation full of divorced people.

So how can I, preaching this text, which sounds so fierce, invite them to the Lord's table?"

Then another pastor, a divorced man himself, simply avoided the question altogether.

But, the question should be this; "Is there any way, for anyone to glean anything helpful from today's Gospel?"

After all this passage has always been a "controversial passage". Therefore making it one of those questions that caused Jesus' to be tested.

Here, Jesus has His back against the wall so to speak, here the Pharisees asked for a yes or no answer. They asked: ***"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"***

Even though the Pharisees themselves were greatly divided on this very question, they still wanted Jesus to answer it.

Maybe they thought if they could pin Jesus down on this issue of divorce, they could criticize Him no matter what His answer was.

But Jesus sees right through their reason for asking this question. So He throws it back into their laps, again exposing their hypocrisy as He so often has.

When Jesus spoke about divorce, He was responding against the backdrop of the casual attitudes that men held about marriage in His day?

Back in those days, Jewish law gave the husband all the power, for example if a wife simply burned supper.

Or if a wife didn't bear enough male children, her husband could merely turn his back to her, and say "I divorce you." And that was it.

Now he was free to find a more appealing, or suitable wife, all the while his ex-wife was left standing alone, in total humiliation.

And for her the only recourse she had was to return to her father's home in shame, hoping her father would receive her back.

But, what Jesus wanted to do here, was to put some teeth into the marriage covenant itself.

Jesus said; ***"Husbands, take your wives seriously!"*** which in those days was a revolutionary thing to say.

A statement that seems to put wives for the first time, on an equal level to their husbands. "Of course that is within the marriage only."

Now, Jesus said: ***"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her,***

Here Jesus affirms that women in the marriage are equal partners therefore deserving the same legal rights as their husbands.

Jesus goes on to say: ***"And if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."***

Why is this so important, well back then woman had no rights, the law said that they couldn't for any reason divorce their husbands.

So we can see, that God's Word here was spoken for a new day. For the church where women were considered full partners in God's household.

Look, the Bible doesn't have just one overriding prohibition on divorce. In fact the Bible speaks with many voices on this question of divorce.

The promise of creation says, we are made for one another, yet it is quiet regarding those occasions when relationships are ripped apart.

So, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? Well Moses assumed it was lawful, but for him it was only the husband's prerogative.

Ezra the priest said in chapter 10: ***"You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel's guilt...Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives."***

And the prophet Malachi said in chapter 2: ***"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel,...***

And then, in the New Testament, Jesus says this: ***"Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."***

Then the apostle Paul, who wasn't married, gave a surprising amount of advice on the subject of divorce.

He wrote in 1 Corinthians chapter 7: ***To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.***

For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

Look, God gathers the church at the baptismal font, not at the marriage altar, and He wants more than anything else, for people to live in peace.

He wants us to recognize other people as partners, not strangers, and to live as companions, not competitors.

The problem is, many Christian people won't accept those who are divorced or divorced and re-married. For example.

A congregation consisting of married and non-married couples announced in their worship bulletin, the formation of a new fellowship group.

The group decided to name this group, "Pairs and Spares." The pastor, a young widower called this well-intentioned group together.

He was certainly upset with the name they chose for their group. He said: what in the world made you think anyone.

Single, divorced or widowed, would want to be known as a "Spare." He said, the church, you and I, were called to welcome all people equally.

Whether their single, have always been single, newly single due to a divorce, or re-married after a divorced.

God calls the church to welcome anybody whom He sends, without preference or prejudice.

And the church should always announce to its divorced, re-married and single people that, "They are welcome here, as all people are."

Look, I think it would be wrong to think that anyone would get married with the intention of getting divorced.

So, every couple who marries does so with the intent "to have and to hold, from this day forward."

That's the promise we make, yet sometimes the promise can no longer be kept because relationships and people break down.

And when that happens, the church is called to offer a welcoming heart and saying: "Come and join us, especially if you are broken, and we will tell you about the Christ who binds our wounds and holds us together."

And for those who are divorced, they need to hear the church say clearly, that they are also welcome here, with whatever they bring.

Look, we live in a fast-paced society that undermines our ability to know one another deeply and intimately.

And our culture worships self-fulfillment more than ever, and not patience, and mercy, nor steadfast love. Self-fulfillment makes it very difficult to nurture a long-term commitment.

Its not easy to pledge yourself to anybody especially in a "me-first" society. Therefore the church needs to support and strengthen marriages.

Look, we cannot expect peace in our world, unless we claim some sense of peace in our own relationships and households.

Know this, working for such peace may require us to stand up against some prevailing thoughts set forth in our culture today.

And no matter how alienated we may feel, God always welcomes us into a personal relationship with Him.

As well as an invitation to His table, to receive the greatest gift ever, His body and blood. A banquet of mercy, that we don't deserve to receive.

Yet were gathered by a grace that covers us all, and when we leave the banquet here today.

Everyone of us are under obligation to extend this hospitality of God, to all people, as they are, and wherever they are.

So, let us learn from a gracious God whose love embraces all mankind. To discover how to live together and love one another, by and through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all. Amen.