

You gotta admit that Jesus has been on a roll. Last week he told his disciples that anyone who got in the way of a new believer's faith might as well tie a millstone around their neck and drown themselves, that it was better to have your hands and your feet cut off than to sin and end up in hell, or to tear out your own eyes rather than to sin and end up in the unquenchable fire. The week before that he was turning the world's understanding of social hierarchy on its head by proclaiming "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And before that he had told his disciples to be willing to lose their life for his sake in order to find true life. And the week before that Jesus healed a Syrophenician woman's daughter breaking all kinds of taboos or customs against dealing with gentiles.

This week when Jesus gives a one-two punch to the Pharisees about divorce when they ask him if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Do you really think that given the extreme hyperbole and radical challenges that he has thrown at his disciples in the previous verses is simply going to say, well, yeah, sure, it's ok.

Puleeze!

No, Jesus is pushing people to see beyond the rules of behavior, to see beyond the laws that society has constructed for managing all the ways it falls short of what God has intended for the kingdom of heaven.

Consequently, Jesus responds that anyone who divorces someone and remarries is committing adultery. Given the divorce rate in this country which some have put as high as 45% Jesus words are a painful rebuke and do not account for the negative conditions and dynamics that can make sustaining a relationship untenable. Better minds than I have wrestled with the question of divorce and how to reconcile our current lifestyles with Jesus' words.

So yes, our ability to live into the Kingdom of heaven is challenged at every turn. But if we step back for a moment and take a broader perspective so that even though this or that pronouncement by Jesus feels harsh it is not intended to be so. Jesus' pronouncements are directed at preserving and protecting those who are vulnerable, whether it is those who are new to their faith, those who are stepped on by others, the notion that we are in control, the boundaries we set up between ourselves and those who are different from us, and those who become dependent on the commitments that we have made.

Marriage is one of many such commitments. We make commitments to our children when they are young or unable to care for themselves, our parents when they are old, our communities, our nation, all of creation.

Today, we will bless the animals in memory of St. Francis whose rapport with all God's creatures sets an example for us when we adopt

a pet. Whether they have fur or scales, wings, or hooves, when we take on the responsibility for one of God's creatures, they become dependent on us and that is about as strong a commitment as I can imagine. Having done so we are not free to disregard that commitment or abandon it. Therefore, in addition to feeling all warm and fuzzy about our pets, we need to recognize that we are stepping into something that is way bigger than we are, when we adopt a pet we are embracing the love that God shared with us in creation, when God created us in his image and gave us dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds or the air and every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Genesis 1:27-28)

Before I close today, I would like to remind you about your commitment to St. Paul's which will be so important in this time of transition. As someone once said to me, “priests come and go, it is the people who are most important to the life of a community.” You have been called to this place, you have been called together to worship God, to work together, to pray and learn together, and sometimes even to play together. Please, when someone is sick contact them, when you haven't seen someone for a few weeks, reach out, and conversely, when you are sick or struggling, let someone know so that you can be supported and cared for. Caring for one another goes both ways. Furthermore, let your wardens know that you are available to help.

Volunteer to do something that needs to be done even if no one asks you to do it. God designed us to be together in community. Live into that commitment; remember your baptismal promises to continue in the apostle's teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and the prayers." We also know that we cannot live into any of our commitments without God's help, so don't be shy about praying and asking for support when you need it.

Some of you have been kind enough to share with me your thanks for the influence I have had on your lives and on the parish. Thank you for your words, but please know that it is you, the people of St. Paul's, individually and together, who have made me the priest that I am. I think you done good, and that, my friends, is what it means to be together in community.

Amen.