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Liturgy of the Word, Mark 10:2-16, Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost, 3rd October 2021
 Mark 10:2-16
 By
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The Collect

O Holy Trinity,
 you are the unity of love;
 keep in love those who are born to each
 and sustain the love of those who choose
 one another
 that all will flourish in the security you
 intend;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord ,
 who lives and reigns with you and the

Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
 Amen

Readings

Job 1:1; 2:1-10
 Psalm 26
 Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12
 Mark 10:2-16

Balancing God’s Will and The Law in an Uncertain and Changing World

Today’s message is puzzling and hard to tackle. How does one begin to address a topic which even in the context of Jesus’ day was already contentious, touching on the sensible and yet delicate nerve that shapes and tests our humanity? As he engages with the Pharisees, while reaffirming the centrality of the law, Jesus appeals to God’s will in creation, taking the Pharisees well beyond their conceived understanding and interpretation of the law of Moses. In Jesus’ time, how one determined the distinction between God’s will and the law was at the heart of debate when it came to thinking about one’s humanity including the pros and cons of marriage and divorce. Marriage and divorce remain very controversial and painful topics even today. Time and context might have changed, but the intensity and anxiety over the experience of marriage and divorce can still be relatively felt in the same way. Jesus is brought to test while on the way to Jerusalem, towards the cross, here it is where the gospel of Mark takes its roots, at the margins of society, at Golgotha, a place of abandonment, where Jesus will end up alone. As Jesus and his disciples are on the way to Jerusalem, the reality of God’s grace and the cost of discipleship begin to surface. Since Caesarea Philippi, Jesus has been preparing his disciples about his own true identity and the nature of discipleship required of those preparing to follow him. Jesus’ wrestling with the Pharisees is a prophetic depiction of the disciples' own wrestling with the reality of God’s will and what the law may demand in the course of their pending ministry. Even as he faces Jerusalem, the wellbeing of women, including their struggles for justice and recognition, remains part of his journey. As it stands, the message is a test not only to Jesus and his disciples but to all of us as human

beings because it borders on how can we strike a balance between what God expects from us and how we ought to respond as humans and people of faith.

Learning From the Experiences of the Little Ones and the Less Fortunate

As we wrestle in trying to find a message that may lead to healing and grace, our consoling insight, in the story, comes from Pope Francis, who insists that Jesus' teaching on marriage and the inadmissibility of divorce may be a joyful message to those who receive from God the wonderful gift of the marital union but a source of anguish for those whose attempt at marriage has failed, yet puzzling and less promising for those contemplating in between:

Amoris laetitia (The Joy of Love) is a post-synodal apostolic exhortation by Pope Francis. Dated 19 March 2016, it synthesizes the Synods on the Family held in 2014 and 2015. Pope Francis invites the Catholic Church and families in particular, to enter more deeply into the beauty of marriage and Christ's teaching. From Genesis to Revelation, Sacred Scripture speaks eloquently about the joys and challenges of marriage and family life.¹

Whatever the route we may choose in tackling the message, the circumstances we are swimming in at present invite us to approach the story with compassion and sensibility. The fact that the story does not exhaust itself at verse 12 but going beyond to include the welfare of children as being at the heart of Jesus' ministry, in verses 13-16, can only indicate a reaffirmed call to compassion and sensibility as wellsprings of Christian discipleship in Mark. If we approach the story with compassion and sensibility, we may quickly realize that the message is less about regulations for ordering conjugal relationships, but more of a glimpse of grace, a vision of God's loving plan for his children in a broken and uncertain world. And, for both Mark and Pope Francis, this plan should remain 'good news for everyone, not just for those who are fortunate. In Mark, we encounter a reaffirmed stance of God's preferential option for the poor. To understand what God's will in creation implies, we should take into account the plight of the less fortunate and their experience of injustice and anguish. Where conjugal relationships may fail in sustaining love but only leading to anguish, divorce cannot be discounted as a form of healing and redress. Jesus' identification with the oppressed and the marginalized of his day cannot be underestimated, hence his appeal to God's will rather than to the law articulates this position. Even as he marched towards calvary Jesus would not cease to take into account the plight of women. Even as he hung on the cross, he would ask the women of Jerusalem not to lament for him but for themselves and for the plight of their own children.

God's Preferential Option for The Poor

Many women reflecting on the stories of marginalization and anguish from an ethic of care may offer us the vocabulary we need to ponder on the present story. Women writing from the perspective of an ethic of care insist that starting from experience rather than norms, in this case, from the experience of suffering and anguish may be a helpful path to justice, hence grace. Pathing from experience rather than norms may help the faithful to realise that there might be alternative avenues to grace, which may give fuller recognition to the fact that there are different conceptions of justice within various social and cultural contexts. One such alternative path to justice is proposed by Iris Marion Young, who maintains that when making a choice of a moral position we are inevitably the captives of our own particular social context. In order to understand what justice means, we need to take into account the

¹Op. cit., *Amoris Laetitia*

perspective of the oppressed and their experience of injustice.² Both Mark and Pope Francis articulate this position:

Pope Francis's ground-breaking new document "Amoris Laetitia" ("The Joy of Love") asks the church to meet people where they are, to consider the complexities of people's lives and to respect people's consciences when it comes to moral decisions. The apostolic exhortation is mainly a document that reflects on family life and encourages families. But it is also the pope's reminder that the church should avoid simply judging people and imposing rules on them without considering their struggles.³

As we continue to read the story with sensibility, we can gradually realize that the message is a form of an invitation to the faithful to remain a sign of mercy and grace wherever family life may lead to imperfection or lack of peace and joy. In fact, Pope Francis uses this very message to invite the faithful to remain a spring of grace where family life might have led to pain and anguish.⁴ Pope Francis sees love as mercy. For him, mercy is the love that all of us need to experience regardless of our life history or track record.⁵ Jesus' teaching on marriage needs to be read alongside Jesus' reminder that the child, and the child's receptiveness to love, is the key to the kingdom of heaven. We are constantly negotiating human traditions and experiences as we strive in determining God's will. The issue of divorce is no different. To be marginalized is to be alone. And we all fear to be there. This is where the Gospel of Mark starts, in lonely places. This is where Jesus will end up, on the cross. Being alone is not what God wants for us. But this claim of faith does not necessarily prescribe an ideal relationship. In other words, especially for Mark, is not God stipulating perfect models of relationships but God saying 'my love transcends every legal boundary to enter every realm of human life:'

What might work in one place may not work in another. The pope is not only speaking in terms of individuals, but geographically as well. "Each country or region...can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs" (3). What makes sense pastorally in one country may even seem out of place in another. For this reason and others, as the pope says at the beginning of the document that for this reason, not every question can be settled by the magisterium, that is, the church's teaching office (3).⁶

Christian faith is about negotiating values in an uncertain and changing world. Marriage and divorce is a complex human problem with social, religious, and cultural repercussions. Jesus uses the story before us to remind us that to be human is to be in a relationship, whatever that relationship may look like. Central to Jesus' message was his concern for the little ones, the frail, the vulnerable, and the lost. Jesus uses the present message, tackling the reality of divorce and the pain it may cause or appease, to reveal yet a much greater reality, the reality of loss and abandonment. Divorce remains a form of loss and abandonment, whether it becomes a form of relief or redress for some. Jesus of course advocates for permanency where couples may have found love, but dissolution where marriage might have failed to bring love. While remaining in a failed relationship may also cause untold suffering and anguish, the scars and bruises that divorce may create are also hard to heal if they are ever

² Young, Iris Marion: *Justice and the Politics of difference*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 1990, pp 5, 37 ff and 56ff.

³ Op. cit., *Amoris Laetitia*

⁴ Op. cit., *Amoris Laetitia*

⁵ Op. cit., *Amoris Laetitia*

⁶ Op. cit., *Amoris Laetitia*

healed. God's preferential option for the poor insists that, in the realm of God's will, those at the margin of society such as the underprivileged, women and children, for Mark, any outsider and the marginalized of society will find their place in the kingdom of God. As a result, Pope Francis insists that the church must help families of every sort, and people in every state of life know that even in their imperfections, they are loved by God and can help others experience that love. Likewise, those charged with the pastoral oversight to sustain the wellbeing of the faithful must work to make people feel welcome in the church. "Amoris Laetitia" offers the vision of a pastoral and merciful church that encourages people to experience the "joy of love." The family is an absolutely essential part of the church, because after all, the church is a "family of families. Amen