

*Dear friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

In 1968 Country singer, Tammy Wynette, released a song whose title was a “spelling out” of a word. The song was “D-I-V-O-R-C-E” and this of course, spells “Divorce”. Whether or not you have heard the song, you know that this trick of spelling things in the presence of young children vs saying certain words is employed yet today, 53 years later. For example, in the presence of young kids we might say on a road trip, “I’ve got some C-A-N-D-Y in the back glove compartment to give them if they are good in the next hour.” Or “Today is when little Billy is going to have to go to the “D-O-C-T-O-R” to get their booster “S-H-O-T”.

So, with that in mind listen to the lyrics of this song...

[Verse 1]

Our little boy is four years old and quite a little man  
 So we spell out the words we don't want him to understand  
 Like T-O-Y or maybe S-U-R P-R-I-S-E  
 But the words we're hiding from him now  
 Tear the heart right out of me

[Chorus]

*Our D-I-V-O-R-C-E; becomes final today  
 Me and little J-O-E will be goin' away  
 I love you both and this will be pure H-E double L for me  
 Oh, I wish that we could stop this D-I-V-O-R-C-E*

[Verse 2]

Watch him smile, he thinks it Christmas  
 Or his 5th Birthday  
 And he thinks C-U-S-T-O-D-Y spells fun or play  
 I spell out all the hurtin' words  
 And turn my head when I speak  
 'Cause I can't spell away this hurt  
 That's drippin' down my cheek

[Chorus]

*Our D-I-V-O-R-C-E; becomes final today  
 Me and little J-O-E will be goin' away  
 I love you both and this will be pure H-E double L for me  
 Oh, I wish that we could stop this D-I-V-O-R-C-E*

To be honest, I have known about this song but mostly the chorus... and this line... “Our D-I-V-O-R-C-E; becomes final today.” But, until preparing to preach today... I hadn’t really understood that the song rather profoundly names the significance of this divorce on not only the mother (I like the H-E...double L reference) that it will be for her to endure, but that this decision will forever affect her son who has “no idea” what is about to transpire.

As a woman who has experienced the pain of divorce and what that means when the divorce happens and involves children—my daughter and son were 9 and 6 years old, a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader and a 1<sup>st</sup> kindergartener—I would say the song is spot on. For all the difficulties of divorcing in and of itself. The part that likely broke my heart the most and my former husband was telling our kids and what it meant for them in the future when it came to shape of “family”. You are right, Tammy Wynette, “H-E- double L” to have to share and then experience such a severing of relationships. No two divorces are the same, but grief and loss accompany every divorced couple and their families.

Interestingly our Gospel reading for today pairs Jesus teaching on divorce to an opportunity Jesus has to teach the disciples about the great value of children. As mentioned in my Children’s Word, the place of children was of not high esteem in the ancient world. It wasn’t that children weren’t loved but their role was certainly less than and, at least in the scenario we hear in Mark’s Gospel, it appears that the disciples do not see them as worthy of Jesus’ attention. But the attention Jesus gives to the children and the attention Jesus gives to the questions to him about divorce, both indicate that relationships are significant enough to clarify boundaries.

The disciples established boundary for the children needs to be redefined and the boundaries between a couple involved in the ancient world’s divorce process also needs redefinition. Jesus places the emphasis on the importance of welcoming children and by doing so, welcoming Him. He places himself in the role of the child to indicate that being in relationship with Jesus is to enter into vulnerability. To set one’s own self aside in order to welcome what it means to welcome Jesus.

I recently heard a mother tell about how two of her three children are stragglers. They often forget things, they can’t find shoes, her daughter sometimes wants to bring her giant bed comforter with her in the van and, as a mom, she usually does not have the patience for such a request because, “we’ve got to go, girl!” But then...after several days of being huffy and sharply saying “No, put it back we’ve got to go” (which leads to tears anyway), for whatever reason,

bringing her bedding matters to her daughter. So this mom decided to ask her “Can you tell me why this matters today?” This mom realized her child might need comfort, and maybe they could find something smaller as a substitute. She wondered if her daughter might be feeling a little disconnected now that the fall routine means going to outside childcare, so taking her bedding is calming to her when she has to be with another care taker. She decided to meet her daughter with kindness... which helps her be kinder towards herself and those needs. Whereas if she dismissed her quickly, her daughter’s going to feel that lack of care and attention. She’s going to feel dismissed, and there goes the important connection. The mom had to remember what matters most—people;relationships and “welcoming” being vulnerable with her child was the way to what mattered the most.

Our hearts are fragile. Whether we are young or old. And when Jesus is asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Jesus first response is to ask them “Why does this matter? You know the law of Moses, right?” And, they did... “Moses said it was lawful to write a certificate of dismissal and divorce his wife.” And then Jesus reminds them that this law had to do with their “*hardness of heart.*” A certificate of dismissal... seems to hold little care except to free one from a relationship and not protect the well-being of the other. Jesus then reminds them of the words from Genesis that sets up God’s intention for the marital relationship to be so unified that nothing can separate it. God’s intention is to guard the hearts of those in a relationship so that together they are one and there is no fear of being separated. What is good for one is good for the other. The relationship is bonded. But, clearly the Mosaic law was a result of a breach in the intention God has for relationships, so Jesus is making it clear that when it is when hearts become hardened to the care and keeping of another... it is good to have laws and rules in place. Ultimately, Jesus wants to protect God’s intentions but also protect the vulnerable.

Later when the disciples ask Jesus a similar question, Jesus references another Mosaic command about adultery and that can be easily misinterpreted if we take it for face value. As a woman who has divorced my first husband and now is married again, the implication of Jesus’ words would be that I am an adulterer. Yet, it is important to clarify that what constituted divorce in the ancient world—a certificate of “dismissal”—was far different from the legality of divorce papers I have in a file cabinet in my home office. Jesus is asking for a proper use of the law in both of these conversations so that a spouse (whichever is most vulnerable) and if there

are children.... Who are inherently vulnerable, that they are in no way restricted from the fullness of life. They are cared for, provided for, given support and clear boundaries.

Suffice to say, this reading from Mark is complicated. Divorce is complicated. Life is complicated. Yet, hear this good news, Jesus is advocating for life. God wants for God's children to have a fullness of life found in healthy and trusted relationships, life that protects the vulnerable, and life that recognizes a God whose intention for there to be a family bond so strong that nothing can break it.

The reading from Hebrews today may seem like a complete abstraction from the weighty nature of the reading from Mark's Gospel, but it is a beautiful and poetic reminder that God's care for us. The writer asks the question, "Who are we as humans to be made just a little lower than the angels, that God might be attentive to us?" and then it answers the question by reminding us that, "*we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*" God entered our lives... messy lives where people's hearts are hardened, where divorce happens, where relationship break, and children carry grief... God is no stranger to our human condition because in Jesus all that is "death"...including the death of relationships has been experienced by Him, too.

"Whoever welcomes a little child welcomes me..." is a reminder today that in our brokenness we recognize a vulnerability that needs the vulnerability of a God who has tasted death in order to give us NEW life.

When I was going through my D-I-V-O-R-C-E I remember some days that were absolutely "HE- double L"... when I wished I didn't have to hurt... my kids didn't have to hurt... my family... there was so much pain... and a counselor said... "There is no quick pass to everything being okay." You just have to go through it...no quick pass to peace. I knew that... and sometimes just acknowledging that was enough. Yet, I will forever be grateful for a community of faith—many of you who prayed for me and supported me and my family—but all the more for a promise I had from Jesus. An invitation to bring my pain to him and heartache, fears and hopes and know that Jesus listens, Jesus gives peace and Jesus was and is with me.

We all care heartaches of one kind or another... and Jesus knows all of that which we carry. In closing I'd like to invite you to place your hand on your heart. God's intention for us is life, on a basic level that your heart is beating today and you are inhaling and exhaling breath,

the Holy Spirit. Keep your hand on your heart and at the same time I invite you to trace the sign of the cross on your forehead. Jesus suffers with us. The cross is a powerful reminder of this. The cross is that symbol of death for the sake of life. Trust that Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels to live among us, takes on all of your life's losses and promises you new life and will continue to give you hope. Amen.