

20 Pentecost B, Proper 22. Mark 10:2-16. October 7, 2018.
Animal Blessing.

Half of y'all are divorced. I'm divorced. And if your divorces were anything like mine, then this gospel reading has called back for about half of us a time of searing pain, dull despair, and the underwater feeling of helplessness to fix something that means the world to us. Even if your divorce was a blessed deliverance from an abusive relationship, I trust that there is grief, hollowness, and ambivalence in the memory of it. And surrounding this reading, we've got the holy silliness of St. Francis and the animal blessing. St. Francis is our best example of the holy fool for Christ, a guy who is almost more Christ-like than Jesus. He is totally out of step with the avarice of the world. He preaches to birds and lives in harmony with the earth, which of course means being discordant with the rhythms of power and greed and pettiness that so typify the rulers of every age. We remember St. Francis by being foolish ourselves, by trying to jar ourselves out of those same rhythms of ambitious sin that are always already laid down as deep established ruts for us.

So this is a very odd pairing we have, which is my fault because I decided that divorce was too important to skip for the happy-clappy Francis readings. And of course I had no idea months ago that we would also be raging and grieving over headlines, though perhaps precedent should have suggested to me that we were likely to be. Jesus' teaching on divorce here at first seems more stringent than that of the Pharisees. It can be read, and has been used, as a way to condemn people who are already broken by their broken relationships. I don't want to be mistaken as giving a blanket sermon in favor of divorce. But I will note that Jesus talks about this because it is brought to him as a test. I will note that the Pharisees ask what a man can get away with, and in a kind of severe feminism, Jesus reorients the whole question to talk about God's intentions for relationships of men and women, with equal standards of accountability. I will note that Jesus' standard for marriage, in its context, may constitute a layer of social protection for women who might otherwise be vulnerable to destitution on the basis of an irrational and emotional male's whim.

But I am less interested in digging down into an answer to the Pharisees' test question for Jesus, and more interested in the odd dynamic of this day. Today we have a mass of celebration, silliness, and blessing—with an icon of suffering stuck deep in the middle of it. The challenge is to honor both. Both are real, both shape our lives. Neither is excluded from a well balanced life of faith. Our pain is real and matters. It counts. It can be redeemed, but is not negated. And our joy and hope and love are changed but not diminished by the reality of pain.

I think I can honor our pain by talking a little about my own divorce, and I hope that I can do that without bleeding all over you, which is a horrible homiletical strategy. And even remembering Tolstoy's dictum that every happy family is alike, but every

unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, I hope that some of my experience touches on aspects of pain that we can all recognize, without claiming that my experience is some kind of map for what divorce is. It may be a stretch, but who knows: maybe divorce and silliness can even have something to say to those of us who are thinking of nothing but national politics and the depravity of rulers.

As is surely the case with many divorces, I was as at fault as my first spouse for the fact that the marriage was not a success. But the decision to stop trying, to part ways, or more specifically to start over with another partner, was hers, not mine. We were young, dirt poor, and childless, so there wasn't much material to fight over. The only questions were dividing our books and friends, and separating our hearts and futures.

The eight months of our divorce were the darkest hours in a life that hadn't exactly been all sunshine before that. I lost a future that, admittedly, didn't look very bright—but it was a future that I had come to think of as mine. The memory of those months is why when I hear about a divorce now my first thought is not “who is at fault?” but “you must be in so much pain.” What I remember most from that time is feeling completely abandoned, rejected, baffled, lost, guilty, and of course, angry. Above all, I felt completely helpless over those things that mattered most in my life.

I learned these feelings in the hard-knock school of divorce, but I'm guessing that you've learned them somewhere, too, whether you've been divorced or not. I think I recognized some of these feelings, or at least their cousins, as I tracked your trauma over the last two weeks of our nation's life. Many of you, I know, are much more intimate with helplessness, loss, rejection, and anger than I am.

The claim our faith makes, and the claim I think that today presses upon us, is that all of this is true. **And** that we are still blessed beloved creatures of God, and that we are still blessings to other creatures of God. I'm not sure whether I can preach it convincingly, but I am convinced that we are blessed and we are a blessing. This broken world, full of all us broken people, is still and will always be God's world. And God's world may be broken, but it will be redeemed. We may be broken, but we will be redeemed. To insist on blessing, to insist on joy, to make room for silliness, even while things fall apart and we struggle to help as many people as we can, may well make us fools. But like St. Francis I pray we will be fools for Christ. We will be a people who give blessings even when we will get nothing in return. Who give care even when we aren't sure that the recipient understands what we're doing. Who do good even when the world or our own lives are bad. And when delightful redemption comes, we will be well-schooled in taking delight. Amen.