

Remember the film *Mrs. Doubtfire*? Robin Williams plays an exuberant father who loves his children, but whose wife finds him way too immature. When she divorces him; he finds himself separated from his kids. He can't stand it. He'll do anything to be with them. So he resorts to an hilarious masquerade as an old-fashioned nanny in order to be with them. Though the story's about the consequences of divorce, it's more about the bonds of love. That's also the dual theme of today's Gospel.

The Pharisees want to trap Jesus. Herod's just executed John the Baptist for his teaching on divorce. So they try to get Jesus talk about it too, asking him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

Jesus responds, "What did Moses command you?" "That a man could issue his wife a certificate of divorce," they say. But Jesus explains that Moses allowed this because of their hardness of heart.

"Is it lawful?" "Is it permitted?"... "What can we get away with?" Jesus answers not in terms of what God permits, but what God intends. He reminds them that God's design for creation is that when a man and a woman are joined, they become one. And what God joins together, no one should separate.

Seems simple doesn't it? Clear-cut, black and white - divorce is not permitted - end of discussion!

Yet, if you peel back the layers of history, culture and context, you get a message that's not so evident.

The Greek word for divorce, is "apoluo," which means "resolution through the removal of difficulties." It's used many times in scripture to refer to a man issuing his wife a certificate of divorce.

If a Jewish man was dissatisfied with his wife in any way he could get a certificate from the authorities and send his wife away. Women had no way to support themselves. There were no shelters or state aid. So, she'd likely become homeless and forced into prostitution or begging to support herself.

Jesus is saying that God's never desires for a man to put his wife out on the street and leave her helpless.

Understanding the context of his words helps us see that he doesn't stand on high to condemn modern marriages which fail. He was reaching out in the midst of abuse and saying, "No more! No more shall the weak be abused. No longer shall a man abandon his wife; nor shall she live in fear."

Jesus stood for the vulnerable. And we're called to stand with him.

We gain strength to do that by remembering that he was talking not about what's permissible under the law, but what's now possible, in the coming kingdom of God, where love, not power, rules. He was declaring a new era in which relationships could work if people lived with each other in mutual care.

Jesus shows that expectation in the next scene when he responds to how the disciples treat children.

Children were being brought to Jesus, and the disciples, seeing them as potential disruptions, tried to send them away. Discipleship as the removal of difficulties! Definitely not what Jesus intended. That's why when he heard it, "he was indignant." "Let them come," he said, "They have the key to heaven."

Children's innocence is both their strength and vulnerability. They haven't learned hardness of heart. They look to the big people in their lives for security, for guidance, for both welcome and boundaries.

That's what they must receive from us! That unconditional trust must not be violated!

That's why one of the most important ministries of the church is its care for children. They need to find security and guidance here, nurture in the way of the One who said, "Let the children come."

We nurture through Sunday school, Bible school, camp, confirmation, youth activities, service projects, and mission trips. But what's most essential is a spirit, a spirit of grace and love, expressed in Jesus words, "Let them come!" Many things might be easier without them: worship (some stay away on Family Sunday), retreats (too many children running around), mission trips (the youth have their own, so why should we have to welcome them on another). But Jesus says we must welcome them into every part of our life; not keep them away, and do the hard work of providing guidance and setting boundaries.

This passage isn't about marital problems, nor about disciples holding children at bay. It's about divorce: about us divorcing not only each other, but our children, and in doing so, divorcing ourselves from God.

It calls us to look at how we separate ourselves from a spouse, another adult, or a child, as a way to accomplish a "removal of difficulties." To look at how we "divorce" ourselves from those who we find difficult, disappointing, or threatening, those we see as less holy, righteous, or committed.

That's not what God does. God doesn't look down on us, see our faults, and use that as a reason to separate from us. No, what God's done in Jesus is just the opposite. God comes to us in our weakness and sin, gets closer to us, deals with even more of our "difficulties." That's how much God loves us.

Separation, divorce, "removal of difficulties," is not what God does. Nor what God wants. No, because God can't stand separation, God comes to us, to bring us to us together, to help us love one another with all our "difficulties," so we'll stick with each other, just as God sticks with us. God didn't stay aloof in holiness; God doesn't want us to stay aloof in our self-perceived holiness.

We usually read this passage as applying to us. Jesus is teaching about divorce, as well as teaching about the need to receive and bless little children. That's a fine and appropriate reading.

But we can also read this passage as about God, as about the great difference between God and us.

We say we love, but then, we break promises. We're not there for people. We use others as vehicles for our own egos, or desire for control. We get addicted. We lie. We manipulate. We hurt. We abuse.

And we say we love children. But children are demanding. They limit our freedom. They must be cared for. They're dependent on us to do things they can't do themselves. And, as they grow, how difficult and disappointing they can be! What conflict and turmoil they can create. Yes, they can be a pain!

When they're difficult they can tempt parents to give up, bide their time, ignore setting boundaries, avoid conflict, till they're grown and out of the house. They can tempt other parents to say, "I don't want my kids around you." They can tempt their church family to say; "I don't want to bother with you."

But Jesus shows us that God's not like that. God doesn't "divorce" us when we disappoint, doesn't resort "removal of difficulties" when we fall short. God doesn't send his children away when they're a pain.

Because God is willing to bear so much to love us, to hold us in relationship, God makes union, communion, possible, for us. That's how we got the church! God loved us in our weakness and called us to struggle to love each other in the same way. That's what communion's about!

God enables us to be a family! And in families you don't get to choose who you love, who you will bear. You love every member! God enables us to do that, to not only to hold on to others when they're difficult, to welcome "little ones" who may disrupt or disappoint, but to give our lives to caring for them. Jesus showed us how far God's willing to go to do that for us. All the way to death on a cross!

On his way to the cross, Jesus takes a moment to teach us. Men are not to use divorce as a means for "removal of difficulties," casting a wife aside, condemning her to poverty and worse. His disciples are to have a love that welcomes, not rejects "the little ones," who may present other kids of "difficulties."

Spread like a banner over these difficult issues, is God's limitless love for his limited children. We fail to love, but God never does. God forgives our failures, and loves us despite our limited love, not only for God, but for each other. God loves us, and never gives up on us, no matter what.

So this gospel is not the bad news of moral standards so high there's no keeping them. It's the good news that despite our failures God is totally loving and faithful and calls us to share that love and faithfulness.

What better message to hear on World Communion Sunday. As we share this sacrament with brothers and sisters around the world, we're saying that as Christ has borne our weaknesses and welcomed us into God's kingdom, we can bear one another's weakness and welcome each other into true family

**HYMN 148 (red) – *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name***

**PRAYER**

Lord Jesus, we are gathered here because you have summoned us,  
...sought us, found us, and bound us to your love.

We celebrate your resourceful, seeking love.

We give thanks that, even though we sometimes fall away from you, you never let us go.  
You keep coming for us, seeking us, and reaching for us.

Thank you for your passionate concern that all have what they need for life,  
...that said “no” to the abuse of power, the breaking of trust, the oppression of the weak.  
Thank you for a love that calls us to bear disappointment, and hold on to relationship.

Thank you, too, for your welcoming children, your welcoming of all who might be difficult,  
...for a love that said “yes” to anyone who sought to come to you, however much they might stumble.

Thank you for calling us together to share such love,  
...for blessing us with a Spirit that enables us to do that.

Thank you for the difficult, challenging, yet high and blessed calling of being a family,  
...of loving one another, never turning away from each other,  
...even when we find each other exasperating.

Help us to love each other that way,  
...to be more than friends we have chosen, because we find each other pleasing,  
...but to be instead the true brothers and sisters with whom you have blessed us,  
...because, in you, we are one. .

Give us the grace to live our lives, to relate to our sisters and brothers,  
...that in some small way others might see some of your reaching, seeking, embracing love in us.

When we consider our blessings, when we consider your mercy and forgiveness,  
...when we look around at my sisters and brothers with whom you have blessed us,  
...how can we do anything but give you thanks and praise.

Thank you for all you have done for us.

With your help may we live lives worthy of your calling.

On this World Communion Sunday,  
...we remember that your hope is that all your children may be one.

We pray that your hope would be realized.

We pray, also, that you would use us to realize it.