

When my parents divorced, I had just graduated from college. They sat across the kitchen table from my brother and me and broke the news. They offered few details, and my brother and I asked for none. They had raised us and invested so much in us that we had no desire to add even a tiny bit of pain to the wound that was opening before our eyes. To the best of my knowledge, no sin had been committed to end their marriage: no adultery, no abuse, no neglect.

I received the news with a cold and heavy sense of grief, but never did it occur to me that they were committing a sin. If anyone had tried to tell me their divorce was a sin, I would have been furious. And since then, two new lives have grown out of the death of a relationship. They are so much happier now, and I'm happy for them. So where is the sin? How can we reconcile Jesus's extreme position on divorce with his radical compassion, inclusivity, and forgiveness? How can the same Jesus who broke bread with all manner of sinners sound so harsh, hard-hearted, and ignorant of human nature? So my question really is, where is the grace?

First, let's take a deep breath and remember that no matter how strongly a passage may make us feel, there's a good chance it's not about us. And indeed, in this case, it's not about us. The thing both Jesus and the Pharisees called "marriage" bears little resemblance to the way we use the word. In those days, a marriage was an extensively-negotiated business transaction between two families. It was a contract, not a sacrament. The couple's happiness, let alone love, was not a consideration.

While modern divorces can be hideous affairs, the end of an ancient marriage was even stickier business, since an ancient marriage involved not one household, but two extended families that had decided to become permanently enmeshed. Jesus and the Pharisees also would have known that divorce immediately placed a woman in great danger, depriving her of her only material support and exposing her to the worst elements of their society.

So while the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus in a tricky hypothetical argument, Jesus has compassion for the flesh-and-blood women who lived every moment of their lives at the mercy of a patriarchal society. Harsh as he sounds, Jesus is not condemning individuals who need to get out of a marriage they never should have gotten into, in our modern understanding of marriage and divorce; rather, he repudiates the vicious, cold-hearted patriarchy that allowed a man to destroy a woman's life on a whim. Rather than extend compassion to actual divorcées, the Pharisees concerned themselves with formulating detailed legal positions on the subject.

Jesus had no time for that. Don't be fooled; he knew perfectly well what my seminary professor said: You know how in a wedding, we say, "Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder." We all know "Some people [who], if God put them together... God was out of his mind!" People make mistakes. Sometimes huge mistakes. And you can't call yourself a Christian and insist that people can never be let off the hook, but must keep suffering. So while we are responsible for supporting people

in their marriages, and we don't celebrate divorce, we rejoice and give thanks for God's mercy. Scripture is rich with examples of God's forgiveness, and the many provisions God makes for human needs and flaws. You could argue that God's gracious response to human weakness is the theme of both the Old and New Testaments.

A principle that gave me a new perspective on human identity and relationships, is that the difference between a child and an adult, is that children count on people being there for them, while adults are people whom other people can count on. And we can always count on God. Like any good rabbi, Jesus knew the difference between what God wants for us in an absolute sense, and what God does to accommodate our flaws — the difference between the ideal pattern of *relationship*, and the brokenness to which God's grace, love, and forgiveness is the ideal response. And because he was God, Jesus was the means by which God would redeem humanity, setting us free from the grip of sin once and for all.

In the prayer Jesus taught to his followers, the first thing we ask for is, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven." We have to ask, and keep asking, because God's will is not consistently done in this world, and thus Earth remains stubbornly far from heaven. Jesus humbled himself, coming out of the perfection of God's will that exists in heaven, coming into our world that is so broken by our sins and our weaknesses, so that he could show us how much God loves us, and open to all people a way of grace and life. As God always does, Jesus met the world's brokenness with grace, and invites us to join him in his sacred mission of love.

The hard part is accepting that we need to change. Accepting the life Jesus offers out of the death of the world is like welcoming a little child into your home. Some things are going to get dirty, and some are going to get broken, but you accept that, and a mountain of uncertainty, and an all-consuming commitment of effort, because you believe it's all going to be worth it. The little child you welcome will change things in two complementary ways: the child will grow and accomplish incredible things, and the act of raising the child will cause you to grow, too. New life is always disruptive, but everything we know about the source of life gives us the courage to embrace the new life Jesus offers. In the same way, his resurrection to new life changed the world, and continues to change it.

As our stewardship theme, "Renewing gratitude, celebrating resurrection," suggests, one of the most consequential ways the resurrection continues changing the world is through healthy, vibrant parish churches like Advent. We will continue to hear stories of how Advent has brought life-changing grace to people here. But today I want all of us to reflect on our own role here, as well as the church's role in our lives. We might not be married to our church, but I think for most people the idea of church membership includes a sense of mutual commitment.

A member should be able to count on their church to celebrate the sacraments, to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ, to serve others, and to be there for our

personal crises and joys — and to do all these things with integrity and competence. But as we renew our gratitude and celebrate all the wonderful things God has done for us, like the Psalmist we should also be asking, who are we? How do we fit into the wondrous reign of God? Is our identity as Christians just a claim, or is there action to back up that claim? Are we only going to count on Advent, or can Advent also count on us?

When we pledge our financial support to Advent, we make it undeniably clear that we are faithful, grateful, committed Christians. Pledging also ensures that we can make the best possible use of every dollar, by letting us plan ahead and make our own commitments to mission and ministry. Pledging makes your gift even more valuable, so even if you aren't sure what your finances will look like next year, please, take your best guess and remember that you can adjust your pledge, up or down, at any time — just notify our bookkeeper.

I understand the anxiety some people have about making commitments, especially financial commitments — I've been there — but I personally found that pledging made me feel less anxious about money overall, because pledging gave meaning and order to my whole financial life. By setting priorities, and putting God as my highest priority, I enjoy a sense of control, purpose, and confidence that no material possession could ever give.

The Church's sacred story, starting with the teachings of Jesus himself, gives us the courage to embrace the new life that Jesus brings to us, even when that means change. Just like with a child, when we accept the Good News, and become more intentional followers of Jesus, the experience changes us for the better. We enjoy experiencing grace, and we enjoy practicing grace. We grow, as St. Paul said, from children to adults, grow into the full stature of Christ. And, through us, Christ changes the world. Count on it.