

Brought to you by ConcordiaTheology.org, bringing you resources that support the vigorous life of the mind in service of the gospel of Christ.

- Jessica: Welcome to Lectionary Kickstart.
We're sparking your thoughts for Sunday as you plan your sermon and teaching lesson.
I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau, here with Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger.
They're both professors of homiletics here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.
You can hear all about us in our introductory episode, but trust me, they are pretty good preachers.
All right, let's get started.
Peter, where are we in the church year?
- Peter: We are at the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, a season in the church when we think about the Holy Spirit working in and among and through us.
- Jessica: And what's the text for the week, David?
- David: Genesis 2, Hebrews 2, Mark 10, and Psalm 128.
- Jessica: As always, I ask each of you to tell me which text you would choose to preach about and to determine who goes first this week, since the Psalm for this week talks a lot about fruit of the labor of your hands, fruitful vine.
What's your favorite fruit?
- Peter: I think fresh raspberries right off the bush.
I don't know if you can beat fresh raspberries.
- David: Well, now that you're talking about picking fruit, I like fresh picked strawberries.
That's great.
- Jessica: If I had to pick between raspberries and strawberries, it'd have to be strawberries.
So David, you win.
You get to go first.
- David: Oh, thank you.
Great.
So I would work with the Gospel reading, Mark 10.
It's always hard when the lectionary brings the texts of divorce up.
The people who've been through divorce, it's traumatic for them.
You have to be careful, I think, when you talk about it.
- Peter: This is why it might be worth preaching on it, because if you don't talk about it, then it just hangs out there when people read it.
Because at least in my perception, we in the church tend to treat divorced people like second-class Christians.
It's one of these sins that never goes away.
Maybe it's the way we talk about it.
You're always divorced.
- David: Yeah, yeah.
- Peter: And I think that's really hard.
And I think people beat themselves.
We had a number of divorced people in my congregation.
It seemed like they were constantly beating themselves up over it, like they could never actually feel forgiven.
- Jessica: I'm glad you picked this text, because it was always hard in youth group.

When we got to this text, or in confirmation, when we did the sixth commandment, because half of my youth come from divorced families.

Half of marriages end in divorce, even in the church.

So many of those kids, and I'm talking about their parents, and I'm reading this, and I don't know how to handle it, because it's been very traumatic for them.

I'm so glad you picked it.

This would be really helpful.

David: Yeah.

Jessica, if you could read verses four through six.

Jessica: And the Pharisees said, Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.

And Jesus said to them, because of your hardness of heart, he wrote you this commandment.

But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female.

David: And that's where I see those two worlds colliding.

The Pharisees are asking, what are we able to do?

Moses allows us to divorce a spouse, and therefore, is this something that we can do?

And Jesus is saying, I'm not interested in debating and talking about what you're able to do.

What I want to talk about is what God desired for you.

From the very beginning, God created marriage to be this beautiful, beautiful experience.

So that's what we've got in the Old Testament lesson.

I think the point is that the Pharisees are approaching it in terms of, what are we able to do?

And when it comes to divorce, what are we able to do?

And Jesus really isn't interested in debating the laws of what they're able to do.

What he's interested in is pulling them behind that to the original gift of what marriage is, and what God's able to do, and when God creates marriage, and prepares a man for a woman, and a woman for a man, and the beauty of that relationship.

Peter: Yeah, it's almost like the Pharisees are looking for the loopholes.

David: Right.

Peter: And Jesus is saying, I'm not interested in looking for the loopholes.

I'm talking about, let's talk bigger picture.

Let's back up and look at what's the whole point of this anyhow.

David: Right.

Right.

And so you begin to have debates about, and like you said, looking for loopholes, or what are we able to do?

And I think what I like about this is it's almost as if Jesus has this big reset button that he just kind of hits, and he said, let's kind of reset the whole conversation.

Marriage is not about what you're able to do, and what you're able to make it to be.

Marriage is a gift from God.

And rather than think about, you know, what are the loopholes, and when can we divorce our spouses, when is it appropriate to do that?

Let's just go back to what marriage actually is, according to God's desire and God's command.

Peter:

I like what you said about how even sometimes in the church we do this, because we get this

mindset about God's design as kind of, we find these loopholes, we find these exceptions, and then we drive an elephant through those.

David: Right.

Peter: And we somehow think, okay, that's following Jesus.

But here, Jesus is really backing us up to a much bigger view.

David: It's kind of, I always think about the Ten Commandments like this, like a fence that's surrounding a pasture of sheep.

And the sheep can be eating anywhere in this glorious pasture.

And they're like at the fence wondering, can I eat the grass that goes through the fence from the other side?

And God's like, you know, get away from the fence.

Let's stop talking about whether this qualifies or not.

There's an entire pasture over here.

Enjoy yourself.

Peter: It should be an electric fence.

That would help.

David: There you go.

Right.

So there's this beautiful moment, I think, when Jesus is trying to reset the conversation and reset it in a way that calls us back to marriage being a gift and what the gifts of that marriage are.

You know, and if you look at that Old Testament reading, you've got that beautiful story of Adam looking at all of the creatures of creation.

And, you know, when you have all the animals of creation brought before you, the wonder of some of the things you see, you know, I mean, like I just saw some fawn in my backyard and they're just so gorgeous.

And I'm thinking what it was like for Adam to be seeing all these beautiful animals and to be naming them.

And yet there's that longing that there's nothing there for him.

And then God comes and takes Eve from his rib and gives him someone for him.

And so kind of asking us to reset things and to think about, you know, where is God in this marriage?

What is God doing when God has given me this partner, this spouse for my lifetime here?

And what are the gifts that are coming here through this?

And I think it's just a call to come back to the fundamentals and to see this marriage as such a beautiful gift from God that we're not going to be asking how can I get out of it, but we're going to be asking what is God giving me through it?

Jessica: What about the high schoolers in your Bible study whose parents are divorced?

They say, was it sinful that they got divorced?

Like, how would you handle that with high schoolers?

They're going to bring it to you.

David: I know they're going to bring it to you.

And, you know, I mean, we recognize that divorce is not part of God's design.

And I would assume that their parents are not, you know, rejoicing and throwing parties to celebrate the fracture and breaking of their marriage.

And the parents are doing everything they can to continue to provide a home and a safe space for their children and to show them love when this aspect of their relationship is breaking apart.

And, you know, sin has consequences.
Sin brings terrible hurts and pains in our life.
But sin is forgiven.
And it's, you know, I mean, so the question, you know, is it a sin?
Is, I mean, you know, yes, of course it's a sin.
But the point is not can we label it a sin.
The point is can we live in forgiveness of sin?

Peter: See, this is even just a toneier voice right now, Dave.

David: Yeah.

Peter: I think this is one of those times when the preacher's tone is really important that you're speaking about these things with a genuine sorrow and grief at the hurt and the pain that's caused by all of our mistakes.
I'm reminded of a children's message I did.

I was doing a children's message series through the Ten Commandments and I got to the Sixth Commandment and I was talking with the kids about this gift of marriage, this wonderful gift.

And as I was doing it, I made eye contact with a little girl who was from a single parent home.

And then it was one of these things where, like, you know, you focus on the person, you see the person behind them, like, off in the distance.

And her mom was off in the distance and the focus kind of shifted to the mom.

And I realized I'm here talking about how wonderful this gift is and I'm crucifying her all over again because she doesn't have that gift in their home.

And so with that children's message, it was one of these times when I realized it always has to, but the gospel has to dominate here because all of our marriages fall short.

None of them are what they should be.

And it's just a matter of what exactly the trouble is, whether it led to a divorce or not.

And so I think you'd have to have some way of expressing the hurt and then also proclaiming this is where the gospel comes into a sermon like this, that the gospel forgiveness and life is bigger than any one of our individual lives in marriage or any other aspect of our life.

Jessica: I think that's huge because if half of the people sitting in the pews are divorced or come from a divorced home or for sure have people in their family that they love who have been divorced, with no sadness in your voice, like you said, and with no forgiveness at the end or just a smidgen of forgiveness, oh, you just kind of left them carrying a heavy backpack full of rocks when they come to church.

Peter: Let me ask you this question.

What do you think about a sermon where you would even say, now I'm going to talk to you and talk to some of you, now I'm going to talk to the others of you and be really explicit about who you're talking to?

David: Oh, I think you could do that.

Yeah, I mean, that's the theory of rhetorical spaces, right?

You create a rhetorical space so that you're addressing people whose life experiences have placed them in a very particular situation.

You don't want them to mishear what you're saying.

And so you speak directly to them so that everyone else and they can say, oh, so this is what you're saying.

You're not saying this, you're saying this, that I can be forgiven, I am forgiven for this sin and I'm a child of God.

Yeah, I think that's a great idea.

I think it also is helpful for the congregation because you're trying to create a community where people know how to talk to one another about such things, right?

Not having the idea in your head that people joyfully wanted to get a divorce, but recognizing that this was a tragic thing that happened in their life, it's like a death.

And it is a death in some ways.

And that you have compassion for people who are grieving and going through all of the different processes of grief.

Jessica: They need comfort.

David: Right, right.

They need comfort and they need the assurance.

Peter: And that's where I think it's helpful to say to those of you who are in this situation, I've got a word of nothing but grace and mercy and forgiveness and love and support, and all of us have that word for you.

And for those of you who are struggling through your marriage, don't go looking for a loophole.

David: Right, yeah.

Peter: Don't do that.

David: Instead of looking at what you're able to do, look at what God is doing as he's giving you the gift of marriage.

Peter: Right, yeah.

David: You just kind of give people actions, attitudes, dispositions of how to approach the topic in their life.

Peter: I tell you, what's going to happen if you preach on this, you're going to have people paying attention very closely because of what you just said, Jessica, about how everybody's impacted by this in some way or another.

And to speak in a way about divorce that's faithful to the Scriptures and also Gospel-centered and grace-filled, that's a message they need to hear, both sides of that.

David: Yeah, and the story of divorce is a painful story.

And I mean, our desire is to preach Christ into that story, the Christ who bore pain that he might carry us through, right, and give us new life in him.

And so, you know, the question is, is that pain something that's causing you to turn away from the church, to see the church as judgmental, to see the church as useless, God didn't help me in my marriage, why would he help me in anything else, or is God using that pain to draw you closer to him, that this is a mystery to be endured during this lifetime?

Jessica: I don't want to dwell on it, but I have to say this.

A very dear friend of mine was in a marriage where she was being abused, and her husband said, you can't divorce me because you're a Christian. Divorce is wrong.

You have to let me stay here.

And she was completely torn because she wanted to be a faithful Christian.

What are you going to say to her?

Because she might be sitting in the pews right now while you're preaching this.

Peter: I think there's a place and a time in some sermons where you can extend invitations to people, and I think you get an extended invitation in a sermon like this to say, some of you are in rough situations right now, and your marriage is not what you dreamed it would be, maybe it's really hard.

Please talk to me, talk to people in our congregation, look for help here, and kind of invite that further conversation outside the sermon, in the sermon, and hopefully maybe give that here the courage to seek help, and then you sort through pastorally or as a congregation what's the best case in this situation.

But I think it's probably smart that you have to at least, and this is part of naming the hurt, that divorce is a hurt, and some marriages are really hard.

David: And I think what's really sad is that this text is bringing up the issue of divorce, bringing up the issue of marriage, and yet it's not a text that's bringing that up in the context of a woman who's being physically abused by her husband and Jesus is responding to her. You've got Pharisees who are not contemplating divorce, what they want to do is test Jesus,

and so they're bringing up this topic of divorce as a way to test Jesus, so they are so detached from marriage, and so detached from the issues of the real life suffering of people that they're using this as a little game to try to entrap Jesus, and Jesus is kind of brushing them away saying, you know, stop all the games, let's get back to what God desires.

God desires a man and a woman for one lifetime, right, and he desires to provide this love to people, and so it's not a text that has the story, the narrative surrounding it that allows you to deal with the relational moments of how Jesus as a Savior and a Shepherd and

a Comforter would engage with those who are suffering and about to be cut by the fracturing of their marriage. It's not dealing with that, and instead he's dealing with religious leaders who are debating this as a way of entrapping him, and it just kind of, it makes that ability to speak from the text into our life situations a little bit more difficult, because we're not sitting here testing Jesus about divorce, we're sitting here with divorces all around us saying, you know, God, what are you doing, how can you come and help?

Peter: And that's where I thought about the tone, you know, the tenor of this conversation, the text is very different than the tenor of your situation, your congregation, and your preaching should, and your teaching should reflect that, I think.

David: Right, yeah, so what we do have is we do have a Savior who is calling us, always calling us to see the good gifts of the Father. If your marriage is rough at this point, yeah, that's right, you know, come during the week, set up a time, talk with us, because we're here to help us hold on to this vision of God, and to care for people who are living in it, and even suffering from it breaking.

Jessica: And if my friend had done that, then you would make sure that she was safe, that she made choices to be safe?

David: Oh my gosh, yeah, oh, yeah, abuse, the first thing you do is you get the hotline for the shelter, I mean, that's, you know, you get out of this situation.

Jessica: Peter, what about you? What would you preach on?

Well, I was thinking I would preach on the Hebrews text. Jessica, would you read the second half of verse 8 and verse 9?

Jessica: Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him, but we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor

because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Peter: See, this is a great, this is a great little paragraph, and so these verses I think are really helpful. I was reading this and I thought of, you remember those digital art pieces where you have to stare at something for a while?

David: Oh yeah.

Jessica: Oh yes, my sons love those.

Peter: Oh, I hate those.

Jessica: No!

David: I do too!

I do too!

Peter: Everyone else is looking at it and saying,

David: Oh, I know, I know!

Oh, that's so cool!

Look at that!

We'll focus on this, focus on that.

Do you see the unicorn?

Peter: Yeah, that's right.

David: Oh, I hate it.

Yeah, I know.

Peter: I hate those things.

So I'm thinking of, with that in mind, and because that came to mind of course because in these verses you just read, there's talk about what we see and what we don't see. At present, we do not see everything in subjection to Jesus, but we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels.

And so I'm thinking of a theme for this sermon, something like seeing, not seeing, and reflecting on what we see and what we don't see.

And the first thing that we don't see, and the primary thing according to these verses that we don't see, is we don't see everything in subjection to Jesus.

Even though the first half of verse, or in the middle of verse 8, it says, God left nothing outside of Jesus' control.

All things are under his feet.

But we don't see that.

Instead, we see, well, we see the wheels coming off everything.

But then we also see it, I think, in our own individual lives.

It sure doesn't look like Jesus is in control.

And so I think I'd want to emphasize at this point in the sermon, kind of early in the sermon, that we don't see that Jesus is actually in charge.

And that's really, that's hard.

And I'd actually want to linger on that just a little bit and let people take seriously that obstacle, that challenge to faith and to faithful living by pointing out, well, the author of the Hebrews is aware of this fact.

We don't see it.

Of course, the story that comes to my mind is Elisha and his servant.

Remember that?

Jessica: Yes, and the angel army.

Peter: Second Kings 6, when the army of the Syrians are coming down and they're sending these

chariots and these horses and they're coming after Elisha and they show up in the night and then the next morning, Elisha's servant wakes up and he's like, oh, shoot, there's an army here.

And what do we do, Elisha?

And Elisha says, oh, don't worry.

And then he says, Lord, open his eyes.

And he sees this whole army of horses and chariots of fire.

Such a cool, what's interesting.

So I was thinking about this.

I just went back and read that passage from first, second Kings 6.

Do you remember what happens after that?

The Syrians, then Elisha prays that God would make the Syrians blind.

And then when they're blind, Elisha leads them into Samaria and they're surrounded by the army of Israel and the king of Israel.

And then he says, open their eyes now.

And they realize they're now about to be slaughtered.

And the king of Israel says to Elisha, should we kill him?

And Elisha says, no, feed him.

Give him a feast.

And then he sends them back home to Syria and says, go on your way.

And so it's this remarkable, these people came to attack Elisha and Elisha filled with the spirit of God.

First of all, shows his servant who's really in charge.

And then he has mercy on these people who are coming to kill him.

And so sometimes that's not the appointed text, of course, the Old Testament for the Sunday.

But sometimes I think, especially in epistle readings, it can be really helpful to draw on a narrative from scripture and kind of connect some dots.

But I would maybe spend a chunk of a sermon on that episode to help people see an example of this not seeing Jesus having all things subjected to him.

But this text also talks about what we do see.

We see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels.

We see, we're talking about Jesus, of course.

We see Jesus' death.

That's one thing we see.

We also see his resurrection.

Again, this is by faith, but we see it and celebrate it by faith that Jesus has broken the power of death, verse 14.

He broke the power of him who holds the power of death.

And so when we see and when we contemplate the resurrection, we see the defeat of death.

And then we also see in verse 11 to 13, it's interesting that He talks about the family, the brothers and sisters, the many sons and daughters that God has brought into His family who are made holy or of the same family.

Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.

So we see our brothers and sisters.

So if we don't see that everything's subjected to Jesus, and we don't, but we do see Jesus'

death, we do see His resurrection, we see the church, His family.

Then I think that then helps us go back to the things we don't see with greater confidence and with more resolve and with faithfulness.

I was trying to think about how to structure a sermon like this, and maybe the paradox maintain structure would work here.

I was thinking you could go that way or you could really expand that Elisha story and give it be kind of a narrative sermon that kind of preaches a little bit on both the

Hebrews text and that second Kings text and bring the hearers into that, help them experience that paradox maybe through the eyes of the servant.

If I was going to go this route, I might read a different Old Testament, I might read a different Gospel reading.

If you're going to read the part about divorce, I think it would be helpful to the people who are divorced or in that situation to address it.

Jessica:

Thanks guys.

That's all for today.

We have more free resources to guide your next step in planning at ConcordiaTheology.org. Check it out.

I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordaleau.

Join us next week here at Lectionary Kickstart when Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger will spark your thoughts for next Sunday.

David:

Did you see the unicorn?