

This summer, our small adult education class studying Lutheran wedding liturgy looked over the options the presiding minister can use to welcome people to the joyous occasion.

One option starts like this: “The Lord God in goodness created us . . . and by the gift of marriage founded human community in a joy that begins now and is brought to perfection in the life to come.”

Then the introduction contains this line: **“Because of sin, our age-old rebellion, the gladness of marriage can be overcast and the gift of a family can become a burden.”**

Our small group initially found it shocking, a little inappropriate, misplaced, perhaps, that the pastor’s opening sentences would mention sin. Our age-old rebellion, our self-focused drive, which casts clouds upon marriage and makes the gift of family a burden.

Of course, this introduction also mentions God’s blessing and gracious support, but that doesn’t change the fact that none of the couples I’ve married have ever chosen this liturgical option.

While we may recognize that being married can have its challenging moments, it’s harder to acknowledge that and how sin enters marriage. Recognizing and naming that sin can enter *any* relationship is difficult. The fact of the matter is that we don’t even have to be married to experience the reality of what our Gospel speaks openly about today: about sin, divorce, and adultery.

When we hear the word “adultery,” our minds likely conjure up sexual infidelity and personal betrayal. But it’s actually a much broader term than that. Adultery threatens any human relationship. After all, to adulterate something is to take it away from its original state or purpose, to use it for our own means and ends, to make it inferior to what it could be.

We adulterate any relationship—a marriage, a friendship, a parental or sibling relationship—any time we use it for our own selfish needs and gains, any time we expect someone to give to us without giving ourselves to them. A teenager makes a friend because she needs a ride to school. A coworker buys you lunch so you’ll do more of his work. A child manipulates a parent for material gain. A friend sticks by our side because our vulnerability makes them look superior. Adultery is actually a sin that is very easy to do without thinking of it. Our age-old rebellion threatens indeed any human relationship.

Because adultery can exist in any relationship, even those of us never married or married and never divorced can experience everything that comes from the breaking of the marital bond: the distance, separation, alienation that the tearing apart of a relationship brings. Because of sin, our age-old rebellion, any of us can feel the pain and shame, failure and fault, shattered dreams and unmet expectations, that the dissolution or rupture of an intimate relationship brings.

We know these things, and Jesus boldly names this inescapable human reality in the Gospel. Why did Moses have a law for dismissal and divorce? Jesus asks his detractors. Because of sin. Because of humanity’s hardness of heart.

When God permitted divorce for Moses and the Israelites, God was naming the hardness of heart the people knew too well: the feelings of unworthiness and un-lovedness that come from navigating the rocky terrain of human relationships. In granting this law, God was calling us out: We have hard hearts. We will hurt one another. We will get hurt by each other.

When Jesus taught the disciples about adultery and divorce, God once again called out our hardness of heart. The group had just been hearing—as we have in the lectionary—Jesus teaching in word and deed about the vulnerable. They had been learning about the outcast deserving more than crumbs. About the Messiah who suffers with the suffering. About children, the day's most inferior people, being worthy of a seat at the table. About evil intentions coming not from outside forces but from inside the human heart.

And the disciples are learning—as we are learning—that Jesus takes seriously the goodness and blessedness of relationships. That the Kingdom of God is a Kingdom of Right Relationships. And that those who follow Christ as disciples must take all kinds of relationships seriously and responsibly.

Which is perhaps why they ask for clarification later in the house. Sin is real. Our age-old rebellion and selfish motives can rear their ugly heads in any bond. And the life of discipleship does not erase the reality of divorce and division or excuse Jesus' followers from pain. So the disciples ask him again about this matter.

It is another difficult teaching. We can imagine that their conversation was tense, or awkward, or confusing, or painful.

And into that conversation come the sounds of little children. “People bringing little children to [Jesus] . . . that he might touch them” and bless them. Into a tough talk about brokenness and isolation comes a combination of elders and little ones seeking union and a healing touch. Against the hard truths of separation and divorce come ones who know few boundaries and who relate to those around them with unquestioned faithfulness.

No wonder that Jesus is indignant with those who keep the children away. For they are the visible sign of Christ’s good news. Here comes a vision of reaching out and reconciliation. Here comes a scene of unconditional love and unmerited forgiveness and undue blessing.

Because here come children, who truthfully talk about good and evil without restraint. Here come tiny tots, who willfully take what they want even when it's not right. Here come kids, who greedily push and shove each other, who lie even when it's obvious, who are still learning how to put others before themselves. Here they come still running to Jesus despite their hardness of heart and because those hearts are also full of love. And there they go . . . accepted into the loving arms, crawling into the warm embrace, encircled by the mighty mercy of God-on-earth.

That is the Gospel's vision to us today: not words condemning divorce but an acknowledgement of the world's and our inevitable human brokenness right beside the captivating image of God's grace and forgiveness, of Christ's understanding and compassion, of the Spirit's mercy and hope.

A scene that says no matter who we are—married, divorced, unwed, widowed; very young or very old or somewhere in between—God will never leave us in sin and pain.

No matter how deep or dark our sin. No matter how painful the division or pervasive the work of separation in our lives, we can always run into the arms of our Creator. We can always rely upon the embrace of our Redeemer. We can always be hugged into health and wholeness by the Holy Spirit.

The Lutheran marriage liturgy's mention of sin, our age-old rebellion, could be heard, as our study group heard it, as a disturbing intrusion of judgment and condemnation into a grace-filled wedding day. Yet it can also sound like a grace-filled acceptance of our shortcomings, and the deeper assurance that the kind of godly love we can witness in relationships and do witness in Jesus can overcome even such abject hardness of heart.

Because sin can enter any relationship, but it can never take away and will never break our relationship with the Triune, Holy God, who takes all the children, who takes all of us, in arms so wide and lays upon us hands of blessing.

AMEN.