

Last weekend Deacon John had to preach on the Gospel passage which spoke about plucking out your eye, or cutting off your hand or foot if it caused you to sin.

Today I have the Gospel passage on divorce, so I think we know who has the more difficult passage.

And I say that with sincerity.

Divorce, after all, is one of the most painful realities that we have to deal with in life, equitable perhaps, to severing a body part. We all know someone who has been affected by divorce.

It is painful for us now, as it was painful for those who lived in Jesus' time, who could so easily end a relationship of such profoundly personal meaning by simply writing a bill and sending one's spouse on their way.

And so we ask, "what do we make of these revolutionary words of Jesus?" "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

On the one hand, this Gospel passage fits into a very precise space in history and tells of a very specific event. The Pharisees are trying to entrap Jesus in his own teaching in order to kill him.

As he enters into the region of Judaea, the Pharisees knew that Jesus' opinion in this matter was of special import, since the ruler of that region, Herod, was living in an irregular marriage. He had married his brother's wife, Herodias, and since both his brother, Philip, and Herodias were still alive, the marriage was seen as adulterous by some, most notably, John the Baptist (Mt 14:1-12).

John the Baptist, we remember, was imprisoned, and put to death, because he told Herod that his relationship with Herodias was not lawful.

That is why the Pharisees are hoping that Jesus will do the same thing, and publicly renounce a marriage such as this, so that a similar outcome that John the Baptist experienced, will befall him as well.

And it does. Jesus is put to death, but not simply for speaking out about divorce and remarriage. He is put to death for speaking another uncomfortable truth, that He is God. That charge of blasphemy was the one brought against him at his trial. In calling himself the Son of the Most High, He was making himself equal to God, a claim that warranted the death penalty (Mt 26:57-68).

But Jesus' whole ministry was filled with these moments of speaking difficult truths to people. Jesus wasn't afraid to enter the temple area and drive out the money-changers who were making a mockery of that holy place, his Father's house, as He referred to it (John 2:13-17).

He wasn't afraid to call the scribes and Pharisees out for their hypocrisy: "woe to you Pharisees...Although you cleanse the outside of the cup and the dish, inside you are filled with plunder and evil" (Luke 11:39). He wasn't afraid to speak out against them, because he knew this is what they needed to hear.

They needed to be opened – "ephphatha," remember that? – they needed to be shook up, because their conception of God had gotten so skewed.

That's why the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, as we read in John's Gospel, so that we could know, with certainty, who God is and what he wants for his people.

And so we see that this difficult passage from today, isn't just about one issue, divorce and remarriage. It speaks to a much broader truth; that God is concerned about how we live our lives because his plan is to restore us to authentic life.

That's why Jesus draws our attention to creation, to the beginning: "Because of the hardness of your hearts [Moses] wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female..."

In the beginning God had a plan, but that plan was foiled by our first parents; and down through the ages whenever God tried to restore what was lost, the plan of restoration was either impeded, or downright

rejected by his people. But God is persistent. Yes, we have hearts that have become hardened, but God has a plan for us.

As we read in the prophet Ezekiel, God says: "I will sprinkle clean water over you to make you clean...I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you so that you walk in my statutes, observe my ordinances, and keep them" (Ez 36:25-27).

It is Jesus who gives us this new heart and new spirit capable of hearing God and following after him. It is Jesus who restores, and fulfills God's plan from the beginning.

And He did this, firstly, by speaking difficult truths to his contemporaries; difficult truths that he continues to speak to us today, to our hearts, not because he is vindictive, not because He is out to get us, or to shame us, but because he loves us.

There is a saying by the late Mother Angelica of the catholic TV station EWTN: "those who tell you the truth love you; those who tell you what you want to hear, love themselves."

Jesus loves us, with a love beyond comprehending, and so He causes us to confront those areas in our life that stand in the way of his plan, so that he can heal, restore, and purify us, because it's as He says "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

And so, we ask ourselves, "what is that difficult truth that I need to hear?" Maybe Jesus' teaching on divorce is an easy truth for you or me to accept, if we're happily married, or not married at all, but perhaps his teaching on loving one's enemies (Mt 5:44) and forgiving seventy seven times (Mt 18:22) is a little more difficult for us to accept.

Maybe his teaching on the rich is what makes us squirm a little: "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mt 19:24).

Or, perhaps Jesus' teaching about judging others hits a little closer to home: "Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eye?" (Mt 7:3).

Whatever it may be, Jesus asks us to accept the truth that we often still have hard hearts, but the flipside of that truth is another, that He loves us too much to let us stay that way; he wants us to be free.

And so, we remember that we find this freedom in the truth that we are God's children, which may, in fact, be the most difficult truth to understand and accept, because, who wants to be told that they have to become like a child?

What we must understand, however, is that to become a child of God is not to revert in any way, to become immature. On the contrary, to become a child of God is to experience what it means to be fully mature, fully alive and free, for to become a child of God means taking on the likeness of the Son, and so live in the truth that you and I are beloved, just as Christ is beloved.

And isn't that a hard truth to accept too sometimes, that God loves us, and yet it is so, which is why becoming a child of God is not something to be glossed over.

To become a child of God is to imitate Christ, and to follow him on that way of humility and total surrender to God's providential care, which is the cross. This, by no means signifies weakness or failure.

On the contrary, the humility of the cross takes great courage, because it means being willing to be confronted by other truths, for instance, the truth of our need for help. This is a freeing truth since it reveals to us that God's love is not something we must earn for ourselves through our own power, as the Pharisees thought.

Rather, it is offered to us freely, often times through his purifying words, which at times are painful because he often speaks to us what we do not want to hear. But remember that this truth is always spoken to us with kindness and mercy because it always invites us into the plan of God's love.

And so I say to you, whatever difficult truth God may be speaking to you, trust him, as a child trusts his or her parents. Trust that when we hear these tough truths spoken to us that they are not condemnations, but invitations to liberation.

Christ is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters (Hebrews 2:11). He is not repulsed by our weakness, by our sins, or by our hard hearts. He has conquered these things by his cross, and he gives himself to us today in the Eucharist as proof of his immense love for us.

So run to him, and welcome him as a child welcomes good things from his or her parents. Then you will experience the hardness of the old heart crumble away within you, as he transforms it into one that is new.