Our Gospel for today ends with Jesus blessing the children – in fact it ends with him insisting on letting them come to him, even as his disciples tried to get them to go away and stop bothering Jesus. Blessing them - even though in Jesus’ day, children were considered so insignificant that they were the least of the least.

Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of God belongs to everyone; including the weakest, most vulnerable of our society – words that we heard in our Gospel a few weeks ago.

As a clinical child psychologist, who spends my days with children, I was sorely tempted to focus this morning on those last few verses of our Gospel – to concentrate on the important message of what children have to teach us about the kingdom of God and, in doing so, successfully avoid the rest of our lesson from Mark and the messy subject of divorce! After all, in my almost 30 years of being a psychologist, I’ve succeeded in mostly avoiding the complicated, emotionally-wrought work of marital counseling!

But like it or not, our Gospel today includes the topic of divorce – Jesus’ response to the questions posed by the Pharisees. And though Jesus responds to their question, he doesn’t appear to want to get caught up in the topic of divorce any more than I do. It was as complicated an issue then as it is now.

It is hard to imagine any of us whose life hasn’t been touched by divorce; the end of our own marriage, or the divorce of our parents or friends or children. Most of us have a personal and emotional reaction to hearing about divorce – feeling of sadness or anger or shame. And maybe the last place we want to hear about divorce is in church! But I would argue that church is the very place we should talk about divorce, and that our faith community is the very place we should be able to bring our sadness or shame. However we all know that church has sometimes been the place where divorce is judged most harshly and those of us who experience divorce in our lives have been hurt rather than helped. And today’s Gospel passage from Mark has been used to judge and harm and isolate people, at a time in their lives when they most need support and caring. It’s easy to assume that in this passage from Mark, Jesus is coming down hard on any of us who have been divorced – calling us sinners. But I’m not sure that’s what Jesus is saying. I’d like to suggest that Jesus’ words have been interpreted too broadly and that we need to go back in time, to see what was happening at the time he said them.

Throughout the past many weeks we have been traveling through the Gospel of Mark, as Jesus and his disciples have traveled through Galilee, toward Jerusalem. Jesus has been announcing his passion and resurrection, and teaching about what it means to be his disciple. And his overriding message is about the kingdom of God, about God’s vision and dream for his children. In fact, Jesus’ first words in the book
of Mark are about the kingdom of God. He comes out of the wilderness, into Galilee saying, “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near”

The book of Mark begins with John the Baptist, proclaiming the coming of Jesus, “Prepare the way of the Lord”, then baptizing him. After his baptism, Jesus was sent in to the wilderness for forty days, with the wild beasts and temptations of Satan. He then made his way to Galilee, to find that John the Baptist had been arrested by Herod Antipas, the military ruler of the city. Herod had recently remarried; he divorced his first wife so that he could marry the object of his desire – who happened to be married to his brother, Herod Philip. In Jesus’ time, divorce was common and legal, but there were differing opinions about what constituted cause for divorce. Herod’s divorce is an example of the fact that, in many places, the law allowed a man to divorce his wife for practically any reason, however trivial. Women at that time were considered the property of their husbands and had no rights. Divorce jeopardized their social or economic survival, and they often ended up among the most poor and destitute. When John the Baptist told Herod that what he had done was wrong even though it might be legal, the new wife was angry, and had Herod order him to be beheaded.

Now you can see why I wanted to just talk about the blessing of the little children!

But on to today’s Gospel. Today Jesus encounters some Pharisees, who ask him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” It’s important to understand that the Pharisees, this group of Jews, who were associated with Herod, weren’t seeking legal advice from Jesus; they were trying to trap him.

There’s sometimes a difference between the “letter of the law” and the intention of the law. One can bend a law to justify a situation that is wrong. Just like one can bend someone’s words to give them a meaning other than what was actually intended. A legal system exists, in part, to protect the vulnerable and care for the weak, to give a voice to whose who have no voice. In the case of Herod, the overly permissive divorce laws allowed him to toss aside his wife, to make her vulnerable, and to do so in a way that dishonored the covenant of marriage – the intent of God that people would come together in marriage and live out their lives as one, in mutual love and respect for each other.

So when Jesus responds to the Pharisee’s question, he talks about “hardness of heart”;

“But of your hardness of heart, God made a commandment for you”.

I didn’t know what hardness of heart meant, so I looked it up.
In the Scriptures various aspects of human anatomy are used to define the whole person, but the most frequently used is heart. The heart is the seat of emotion, intelligence, morality, human choice, and one's religious life. The heart symbolizes the whole person in all of his or her distinctive human activity as a thinking, planning, willing, feeling, worshiping, social being. It is within the heart that God works. So when the person is not living according to God's will, it is the heart that is described as darkened, rebellious, or unfeeling. Thus the human heart may be tender and soft or as hard as stone. Hardness of heart, a heart of stone thus describes a negative condition in which the person ignores or rejects the gracious offer of God to be a part of his or her life.

So Jesus says to the Pharisees, “Because of your hardness of heart”; because God knew of your potential to be willful and your potential to misuse divorce laws for your own convenience, with no care for those weaker than yourselves – because of your hardness of heart God gave you the commandments – all 613 of them, including a formal process for divorce – a process that was lengthy, expensive, written, and had strict rules for what constituted lawful grounds. Jesus is making the point that if the covenant of marriage is treated so casually, and divorce laws are twisted and distorted to make way for a girlfriend, that is certainly a violation of the spirit and the intention of God’s law.

And he goes further by making a reference to Genesis, to a focus on creation and relationship. He repeats the message with which Mark begins, and the message that he repeats over and over – about God’s dream for his kingdom, here on earth. Marriage, he suggests, is far more significant than a matter of law. God’s vision for us is that we form relationships that fulfill his dream of creation; relationships that reflect his love and abundance.

So, where does that leave us today?

First, it means that the covenant of marriage is still just as valid today as it was in the beginning of creation. Ideally, when two people marry, what happens is what Genesis says; “two become one”, in a relationship of lifelong love and respect. Any of us who have been married know the challenges it represents: fitting together two lifetimes of patterns and preferences, differences in hopes and dreams, the melding together of two extended families – not to mention the added pressures of work and children…and that church committee that Fr. George (Fr. Victor) asked you to serve on!

Ideally we could all keep our marriages healthy, even in today’s fast-paced and stress-filled world. God’s wish for us was not to live alone, but to live in loving and
committed relationships, and in an ideal world, there would be no such thing as divorce.

But we don’t live in an ideal world. We are only human, with human frailties, and we often fall short of God’s dream for us. That means, like it or not, divorce happens. Sometimes, in spite of our best efforts, marriages fail. And a divorce is the death of a marriage; it is a time of great loss and a time of grieving. It is a very vulnerable time for the people involved. Most people would describe the period around their divorce as one of the most difficult times of their lives. And sadly, it has often been a time when people feel isolated from their community of faith, when they feel like they are not welcome, or indeed, are judged.

But as is always the case, in difficult times, we, as a church, as a community of faith, have an opportunity to show what we are really all about. We can demonstrate what we know and who we are as followers of Jesus. We can be a beacon of God’s kingdom for those who need it. We have an opportunity to gather around those who are grieving, to offer our support and caring, to minister to those who feel weak and vulnerable.

If our church is one that has no room for shaming or judgment about divorce, and if, as a result, people who are in this community can bring their difficulties here just as they are without having to hide or conceal their circumstances—then a door opens for us. If instead of taking sides or turning away, we offer words of kindness and support—if instead of hardness of heart we open our hearts and are truly willing to see the suffering of others—in those moments something holy happens. We step together, through His door of compassion, into the kingdom of God.

Amen.