

Our starting place in our scripture today is where we end up with Jesus. In addressing the concerns of the Pharisees and the disciples regarding the lawfulness of divorce, Jesus reorients us to what it means to be in perfect relationship with our creator and with one another, and Jesus demonstrates this by hugging the children and blessing them, or as it is written in the New Revised Standard children in his arms, laying hands upon them, and blessing them.” What Jesus is confronting is not so much what is allowable according to the law, but the laws themselves which allow for abuse and injustice to flourish. This is one of the many times in scripture in which the legal authorities intend to trap Jesus by asking him a question that has no good answer. And as any good lawyer will tell you, you never ask a question that you don’t already know the answer to first. This is what makes Jesus so confounding to our sensibilities both then and now. We think we already know the answers. Then and now, we are a people that would rather protect ourselves under laws and statutes than to live according to God’s grace. According to Jesus, the first and foremost natural law of God in relationship to creation is to embrace it and bless it. In the very first chapter of the Bible, just 31 verses into the sacred text, God looks at what God has made and calls it all good. And the superlative we get for the degree of this goodness varies in the translations from “very good,” to “supremely good.” The point being: God don’t make junk. You and I are made in the image of God and to violate that concept violates God’s intentions for our right relationship with one another. And so we have this text that begs the question about divorce in the midst of the crowds bringing children to Jesus for him to bless. Divorce, children, marriage, family, life together—it can all get very complicated very fast when we are in relationship with one another. Love of the other can turn us into irrational creatures so very quickly just as hatred of the other can. Quite often, what Jesus says about divorce in this passage is construed to mean that the act of divorce is a sin, and that my friends, is a very simplistic and even lazy interpretation of this text. Jesus says flat out to the Pharisees that are attempting to entrap him: you only have this law because of your hardness of heart. Just because Moses gave in to the community’s desire of severing the ties between two people who were previously committed to each other, it doesn’t make the law itself right. Laws have the potential to hurt people. That is the real issue Jesus takes up here— injustice. Our collective understandings on faith and law in The United Methodist Church by and large are centered on being loving and thoughtful in our relationships with one another. Our Social Principles in the United Methodist Church talk about divorce in this way: God’s plan is for lifelong, faithful marriage. The church must be on the forefront of premarital, marital, and post-marital counseling in order to create and preserve healthy relationships. However, when a married couple is estranged beyond reconciliation, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, divorce is a regrettable alternative in the midst of brokenness. We grieve over the devastating emotional, spiritual, and economic consequences of divorce for all involved, understanding that

women and especially children are disproportionately impacted by such burdens. As the Church we are concerned about high divorce rates. It is recommended that methods of mediation be used to minimize the adversarial nature and fault-finding that are often part of our current judicial processes, encouraging reconciliation wherever possible. We also support efforts by governments to reform divorce laws and other aspects of family law in order to address negative trends such as high divorce rates. Although divorce publicly declares that a marriage no longer exists, other covenantal relationships resulting from the marriage remain, such as the nurture and support of children and extended family ties. We urge respectful negotiations in deciding the custody of minor children and support the consideration of either or both parents for this responsibility in that custody not be reduced to financial support, control, or manipulation and retaliation. The welfare of each child is the most important consideration. Divorce does not preclude a new marriage. We encourage an intentional commitment of the Church and society to minister compassionately to those in the process of divorce, as well as members of divorced and remarried families, in a community of faith where God's grace is shared by all." Very simply, the way we understand divorce and marriage in the United Methodist Church begins and ends with our relationship with God. Furthermore, marriage is not some standard to be met for each and every person. While our most complete understanding of marriage is for a couple to covenant to be fruitful under God's care, fruitfulness will express itself differently from couple to couple. Single people, widows, and divorced persons are just as capable of expressing fruitfulness in their personal relationships as are married couples. Fruitfulness in God's eyes is not limited to the progeny that come from marriage. Fruitfulness is a work of the Spirit and expresses itself as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. As much as we may try to divorce ourselves from God's tenderness, mercy, and love, it will not let us go! Absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God! Here and now we are all God's children and where we end up with our brother Jesus today is at table. Christ is in this place to embrace, to bless, to heal us of our woundedness and to mend our broken places. We are each made in the image of God to hug and to bless. Hear the invitation today to be embraced by God and to be blessed. Receive the newness of life that causes you to embrace and bless the other. May it be so. Amen.