We have challenging readings about marriage and divorce. It is Respect Life Sunday. In the Gospel, Jesus instructs “Let the children come to me.” But then after all the good news during Pope Francis’ visit, we are slapped in the face with another mass murder, a sick young man taking innocent lives in Oregon this week.

How do we bring all of this to the scriptures? How do we find a message in the scriptures that can help us negotiate our way through this messed up world we live in? I believe recognizing that our scriptures this Sunday are dealing with three different eras, three different modes of existence will be very helpful in sorting it all out.

Our first reading today is situated in the time before time. The dawn of creation. Genesis: In the beginning. It’s a story shaped to tell us where we came from, and how we fit into the world. Most importantly, it’s a picture of the ideal world before sin entered the scene. Life before the fall from grace.

In the Gospel, the Pharisees who were testing Jesus had their eyes set on the present. The world they were living in at the time, sin and all.

In response, Jesus points back to the world before sin, when he says “from the beginning”, and quotes the passage from Genesis. He chooses not to spend his energy taking sides in the world the Pharisees were trying to draw him into, and then, as the episode ends, he looks ahead to the world to come, life in the kingdom, where God’s mercy conquers sin.

So, we have life before the Fall, the present, and God’s future, to be entered when we accept it as a child.

In a world without sin, every marriage would result in two becoming one, growing together in love, into an inseparable bond.

In a world without sin, we would realize we are formed from the clay of the earth, we have an intimate bond with creation, and just as a parent naming a child reflects a blood bond, we would realize that we have such a bond with all creatures, a covenant with all God created.

Snatching a forbidden fruit from the tree is an excellent way to envision sin entering the picture – a selfish act of taking that leads to all kinds of trouble, as selfish acts always do.

But we have to get back to the Pharisees testing Jesus. They wanted to see which side Jesus would take. At the time, there were two schools of thought about marriage, that of Rabbi Shammai, and that of Rabbi Hillel. The school of Shammai held that a man could only divorce his wife if she committed some grave transgression, like infidelity. The other school of thought maintained that burning dinner was reason enough. In short, for Hillel, any excuse would be sufficient to permit divorce. So what would Rabbi Jesus say?
Instead of accepting divorce as a forgone conclusion, Jesus looks back to how God designed the world. God didn’t intend sin, nor did God intend marriage to be a temporary contract. It was to be a covenant. Covenants can be very demanding, but in exchange for the challenges, covenants offer a wonderful security. But when a covenant isn’t truly formed, there is no security. It can be tragic.

So our church holds up the ideal that marriage is an inseparable bond, a sacrament in which husband and wife can truly become one. A life-giving partnership. Marriage preparation is intended to lay the groundwork. But the church also realizes that we live in a world where sin still infects us all, and can infect relationships as well.

Not every couple standing before the altar fully understands what it takes to form a lifelong bond. Sometimes family of origin issues, psychological problems, addictions or other issues can make it almost impossible for such a bond to form. So dioceses have tribunals, to determine if there were reasons, unredeemed weaknesses from the beginning of the marriage, which prevented a sacramental union being formed.

With God’s help, we try to hold in tension: an ideal, flawed human beings, and mercy.

The church doesn’t say that any excuse works to end a marriage. But we do acknowledge that sometimes, because of the brokenness of our world, couples may hope to enter a permanent relationship, but that ideal is somehow blocked.

Just as God didn’t design the world to include the pain and suffering that broken relationships and divorce can bring, God didn’t design the world for some human life to have value, and other life to be expendable. Every human life is sacred in God’s eyes, and God gave us commandments and laws for the protection of every life. Written into God’s law is the principle that any way in which we diminish the sacredness of a human life, ours or any other’s, is a sin, and to take a human life is a great sin, one that would require great mercy.

On Respect Life Sunday, we celebrate the sacredness of life. We pray that all people may come to recognize the central truth of God’s revelation to us: Life is a gift to be treasured, from the day we are conceived, until the day God calls us home.

The Gospel shows us Jesus living in the world of grace, living in the kingdom, not ruled by sin. He seeks to draw us into that world. That he is living in grace is evident when he speaks so lovingly about the miracle of two becoming one. The grace shines forth as he blesses little children that his disciples think are a bother.

Is there any better answer to the tragedies in this world than to ask Jesus to make us more like him? I don’t think so!

Do we need to pray for a heart that loves as he loves, so that we can be willing to sacrifice in order to unleash mercy and forgiveness? Absolutely!

Do we need to pray for an outpouring of mercy? Beyond a doubt.
The tragedy in Oregon illustrates with horrible clarity just what happens in a world where life is not cherished, and where the balance between protecting life, and rights balanced with serious responsibilities regarding weapons is lost.

The violence in the Middle East is a window into a world where life is considered expendable, where hatred is actually considered a virtue.

To define taking a life through abortion as a right to choose, to be defended at any cost rather than a tragedy to lament is yet another example of how distorted thinking can become when humans get to define what is right and wrong leaving the creator out of the picture.

Dear Jesus, help us to see the world as it was intended to be, without sin. Help us to see how you bring us love and mercy, to heal, to remedy the brokenness sin can cause. Help us to bring a passion for proclaiming the dignity of life into this world. In a world so wracked by sin, so slow to cherish life, help us to treasure your most precious gift. Despite the brokenness of our world and of relationships, lead us to embrace the Kingdom of God as children, with a longing to bring all your children along with us.

Guide us with the light of your truth, pave the way with mercy, help us Lord!