

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Mark 10:2-16 (NRSV)

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" [3] He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" [4] They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." [5] But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. [6] But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' [7] 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, [8] and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. [9] Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

[10] Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. [11] He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; [12] and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

[13] People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. [14] But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. [15] Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." [16] And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

PREACHING ON DIVORCE

One of our Bible study groups wagers on which passage I will choose to preach on each week. This week they all got it wrong. No one thought that I would preach on this passage about Jesus' strict teaching on marriage and divorce.

I can understand why they might think that. Dotted throughout any congregation are people who have divorced and remarried. And no matter what I say about this passage the sermon is bound to reopen old wounds and stir feelings of failure. Almost every family has experienced the life changing heartbreak of divorce.

On account of the message of this passage, some have stayed in bad marriages, marriages that were even abusive because they thought that they had no choice. Others have left but with a great deal of guilt. They truly believed that staying married was God's will for their life and in getting a divorce they had failed God in a terrible way.

I want to say from the very beginning that we should never use this passage to beat down people who have gotten a divorce. Those who have been divorced know first hand the psychological, financial and spiritual costs of this tragedy. Divorce is like death. We can live again after it happens, but our life will forever be colored by the experience.

And all of us should realize that even the strongest relationship is as fragile and as temporary as the flowers of the field. We should approach the tragedies of others with a sense of humility and compassion. If you think that those of us who are Christian are immune from divorce, think again. The divorce rate of Christians (both evangelical and not) are about the same as the divorce rate of the general population ... about 35-38%.

We too, in one way or another will one day walk down a dark path and lose relationships that are very important to us. In that regard we should cherish the time we have together and weep with those who have experienced loss instead of condemning them.

Having said all that we also have to frankly acknowledge that the teaching of Jesus in our lesson for today comes down hard and heavy on divorce. His advice might be summarized by simply saying, "Just say no to divorce!" And we want to say, "If only it were that simple!"

DIVORCE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

In order to understand any passage of Scripture we need to understand the context and background. And this is especially true in our lesson for today. Why was Jesus so strict in his teaching on divorce? What was he trying to accomplish by teaching that divorce should not be allowed at all?

I think that Jesus was trying to protect those who were most vulnerable. In this case, the vulnerable ones, the "little ones" were wives who had been

abandoned by their husbands. They had been divorced for no good reason. There has always been a big difference between what is legal and what is right. And that's what today's Scripture is all about. Just because something is legal doesn't make it right in God's eyes.

The Scripture tells us that the Pharisees wanted to test Jesus. They were asking a question about divorce to gain political advantage. They wanted to either get him into hot water with the authorities or make him less popular with the people.

The same thing happens in politics today. People puff out their chest and talk about family values and morality and so forth. But, quite often their words ring hollow because all they are really trying to do is gain votes on the basis of their high sounding words. If you really analyze what they are saying you'll find that often their high sounding words are really lies disguised as morality. (Unfortunately, we know that though people say they hate negative ads, negative ads work! Someone is voting on the basis of these televised lies and half-truths.)

We will see that this was exactly what was happening in our passage for today. Today's question was a trick question, much like when they asked Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. Either answer in that case would have gotten him into hot water, but he amazed them all by saying, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's"

And in the same way, Jesus took a trick question about divorce and used it as a way to teach a higher spiritual truth. Jesus manages to elevate the conversation. Instead of debating the grounds for divorce, Jesus leads us in a discussion of the meaning of love and marriage.

The religious leaders asked Jesus "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

Notice that they didn't ask the question the other way around. They weren't interested in whether a wife could divorce her husband. Women's rights were not an issue in the ancient world. Women, by and large, had no rights. And this was especially true when it came to divorce.

But, men, on the other hand held all the cards. Grounds for divorce for men could be quite liberal depending on your lawyer.

OBJECTIONABLE

The argument hinged on the interpretation of a passage from the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 24:1 talks about a man entering into a marriage with a woman that does not please him. He finds something objectionable about his new bride and is then allowed to write her a certificate of divorce and send her out of the house.

The question that the Pharisees wanted Jesus to rule upon was this: How do you define the word objectionable? How bad does this new bride have to be before the man is allowed to write a certificate of divorce?

One group of lawyers interpreted the word objectionable in a very liberal way. Grounds for divorce could include such minor offenses as spoiling a dish of food, talking to a stranger or speaking disrespectfully to the husband. One rabbi even said that if a husband found a woman who was prettier than his wife, that this was grounds for divorce.

Of course this liberal school on divorce was very popular with the people in charge (the men), and it made divorce tragically common. It put women in a very insecure position. They were left with absolutely nothing but a piece of paper that said they were officially divorced and could marry somebody else ... if they were lucky enough to find someone who would marry them.

The Pharisees rightly suspected that Jesus would not be in favor of this interpretation ... as popular as it was with some. After all, Jesus had a track record of taking the side of those whom society did not care about. So, they predicted that Jesus would interpret this passage along the lines of a more conservative group. This group suggested that the only thing objectionable enough to make a divorce permissible was adultery.

This was obviously what John the Baptist believed, and that was why he was so openly critical of King Herod when Herod married Herodias, his brother's wife. John said that the marriage wasn't legal. And John lost his head for

such scruples. And this was precisely what the Pharisees hoped would happen to Jesus!

NO GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE

But, Jesus gave an answer that went beyond this debate about what was objectionable enough to warrant divorce. Jesus said that divorce itself went against God's law. Jesus said, "This law was given to you because your hearts were hard." In other words, this regulation was a way of keeping a bad situation from getting worse. It was an effort to reduce the negative impact of divorce by having a law that made it more difficult to obtain and to regulate it in a very minor way.

But, says Jesus, in order to really understand what God wants you have to look at the whole counsel of God's word. The spirit of marriage comes not from rules and regulations but from the very life of creation itself.

Jesus said that when God created us male and female, he created us with the need for relationship. In marriage, the "two become one flesh," and it is God's will that they not be separated. You remember that part of the ceremony. "Those whom God has joined together let no one separate." I consider it the high point of the whole wedding. I make sure that I place my cold hands on the hands of that couple getting married so they will be shocked into remembering that this is important.

GOD'S PLAN FOR MARRIAGE

Now obviously it doesn't always work out that way. Most every family here today has been touched by the tragedy of divorce because (as Jesus put it) we have hard hearts, our relationships are less than they should be and often they end tragically. Men and women do separate what God has joined.

But, Jesus tells us that this brokenness, this sinfulness is not God's will for us. Jesus refuses to let our failures and our problems in marriage (and in other areas of our life for that matter) define what is right and what should be. Jesus gives us a better way, a way in which a man and a woman freely give themselves to each other out of love.

God desires marriage to be a place of safety and security. God desires marriage to be a place where lives are shared in a very deep way. God's will is found in that familiar phrase, "the two will become one flesh."

And this refers to more than just living together as husband and wife. It also refers to a way of relating to another person. It refers to understanding the needs and hopes of another person. It refers to working together to achieve common goals. It refers to a commitment to stay together despite hardships and disappointments.

In short, marriage is based on love and not upon legal agreements. And how we treat each other in marriage is a reflection of our relationship with God. If we mistreat those who are closest to us, how can we claim to have the love of God in our hearts?

THE LOVE STANDARD

This applies not only to marriage but to our other relationships as well. In our relationships with others are we doing only what is legal, only what is required? Do we interpret the law in our favor and use it to our advantage?

Or, are we going beyond the law to do what God requires?
Do we love others in the name of Christ?

The Bible tells us that when God created us in his own image; he created us male and female. (Genesis 1:27)

Some theologians say that the image of God is revealed in our capacity to have loving relationships with others. We are by our very nature created for these relationships, and it is in our very human relationships that find the presence of God.

In John's first letter we read, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." 1 John 4:20

As Christ loved and died for the church, so we are to love and give of ourselves to others. This applies to our marriages, and it also applies to all those around us.

LOVE IS EXPANSIVE

Love is always expansive. It never collapses in upon itself but reaches out to others.

There's a beautiful prayer in the Book of Common Worship that I often use when I perform a marriage. Part of that prayer for the new couple goes, "Make their life together a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair. Give them such fulfillment of their mutual love that they may reach out in concern for others."

In other words, love can lead us to even greater vistas of service and hope. As we love those who are closest to us, we are enabled to expand that love to others and in that way be a sign of God's kingdom here on earth.

But, so often, instead of trying to expand our love, we try to narrow the focus. We try to limit our love. We are like the lawyer who (wishing to justify himself) asked Jesus, "Now exactly who is my neighbor?" He wanted a technical definition so that he could manage his life and limit his love. But, Jesus gave him an expansive definition. Jesus said that a neighbor was anyone, anywhere who needed to be loved.

In our lesson for today, Jesus is telling us that in our marriages as well as in all our relationships, we can't put a limit on love.

We can't begin our marriages preparing for divorce. We can't manage our life by trying to limit our love. Life is not about the "ifs, ands, and buts" of legal limits. We can't say, "I'll love my wife, but only if she deserves that love. I'll love my children, but only if they live up to my expectations. I'll love the person who is down and out, but only if they show a proper amount of gratitude when I help them."

Love just doesn't work that way.

Like the Pharisees, we sometimes even try to enlist Jesus in our attempts to place a limit on our love. We can even find Scriptures to prove our point.

But, Jesus still points out that our hearts are hard and our understanding of Scripture is flawed. Love and loving relationships are built into the very nature of creation. We cannot throw those relationships away without denying the very essence of who we are and whose we are.

The prophet Hosea told his people that God wanted more than religious ritual, sacrifice and burnt offerings. God wanted love.

LOVE IS AN ACTION

Jesus was once asked to summarize the law and the prophets and he said that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves.

The Christian does not depend upon the law. The purpose of the law, in the Bible and in society, is to keep things from getting as bad as they could be. But, the law was never meant to produce righteousness. The law was never meant to produce the world that God wants.

Instead, God in Christ envisions a world based upon love. It is a gracious love that does not ask about personal rights but instead gives itself away as God in Christ gave himself for us. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians talked about love in this way,

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NRSV)

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant [5] or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; [6] it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. [7] It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

For the Christian, this kind of love should be expressed in our marriage, and it should be expressed in our relationships with others. I use this passage when I do a wedding and I point out that love in this passage is not primarily a feeling but an action. Love is not just about passion but the actions we take

and the commitments we honor. This kind of love does not end with the passing of time. This kind of love grows with the passing of time.

THE LITTLE ONES

Throughout the gospels we see that Jesus had a special compassion for those who were most vulnerable in society. He healed those who were ill. He offered forgiveness and a new life to those who were rejected and alone.

In today's passage, we see that he was interested in justice for women who were treated in an unloving and unfair way by their husbands. He showed special interest toward children and the fact that their lives and needs were just as important as the lives and needs of "big people."

I think that little ones are still of special interest to our Savior. He cares about those little ones who need his love the most, those whose life is in turmoil and are totally dependent. And if we are wise, we will learn that this means all of us.

Jesus tells us to have compassion upon those who, like little children, sometimes feel small and insignificant. And when we do that, when we begin to relate to others on the basis of gracious love instead of law, we begin to realize that we are not all that different from the vulnerable people we are trying to serve.

We get in touch with our own sense of need. We realize how we are small and helpless and broken in so many ways.

And then, we too come to Jesus as little children and realize that he accepts us just as we are. Though others may not have time for us, Jesus always has time for us.

He lays his hands upon us as he laid his hands upon the children. He lays his hands upon our failures and our broken relationships and our broken promises and our broken bodies and gives us his blessing.

And his love and mercy follow us this day and all the days of our life. He softens our hard hearts and welcomes us home.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN