

Mark 10:2 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.”

Mark 10:10 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.”

Mark 10:13 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.

## NO LAUGHING MATTER

I never thought that the David Letterman show would be fertile ground for sermon illustrations, but this week it was. David admitted to having affairs with several women who worked on his show, and he made it into a big joke. The audience laughed, and the show went on.

That's how many in our society view adultery. It's a big joke. We laugh about it and the show goes on. But the laughter is cynical and has a very hard edge.

Often I talk about how the world today is quite different from the ancient world. If we are going to understand what the Bible is saying to us today we have to first understand what the Bible was saying in days gone by. That's true, and it's especially true of this very difficult passage about divorce.

But, it also strikes me that some things remain the same. Men in power often exploit women and make adultery into a joke. For the adulterer the question is not, "Is this right or wrong?" The question is, "How can I make things easy on myself? What is the best strategy for getting a divorce?"

This is not a theoretical sermon for anyone here today. This is still a hot topic. Some of you have experienced the pain of divorce. Some of you have been betrayed by a loved one. Some of you are children of divorced parents and are afraid getting married because of what happened to your parents.

Often people tell me that we've made divorce too easy. I would suggest that those people should spend some time in a divorce recovery group. They would learn quite quickly that there is no such thing as an easy divorce. The people in those groups are asking, "Why does it still hurt so much? Will the pain ever go away?"

## A QUESTION ABOUT THE LAW

In Jesus' day there were no divorce recovery groups. Marriage was not about love and personal fulfillment. Marriage was about money and political advantage. Fathers gave their daughters in marriage in order to form alliances with other families. A woman was always considered to be the property of some man, first the father and then her husband.

So, the question of the Pharisees was "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" No one would ever ask the question the other way round. No one cared what the

woman thought. The only concern was that legal precedent be followed.

Divorce was a fact of life in the ancient world just as it is a fact of life in our world. But, as it happens today morality was also a religious and political football.

Religious and political leaders tried to gain an advantage over their opponents by mapping out a particular stance on important family matters. And one of the hot button issues of the day was this issue of divorce.

What did it take to get a divorce? What i's had to dotted and what t's had to be crossed in order to make it legal.

Just like our society they had their liberals and their conservatives when it came to divorce. When Jesus asked the Pharisees, "What does the law of Moses say about this?" they had a ready answer. The Pharisees paraphrase Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which permits a man to divorce his wife if he "finds something objectionable about her."

And of course the sixty four dollar question (at least for the men) was how objectionable does she have to be? That's where the liberal and conservative debate comes into play. Those from the scribal school of Hillel take this to mean that a guy can get a divorce for any reason. On the other hand the school of Shammai takes this to mean

that divorce is allowed only in the case of adultery. No doubt there were people who took many different positions in between these two extremes.

## A TEST

But, notice that the Pharisees didn't really care what Jesus believed about this controversial topic. They asked this question to test or trap him. The Pharisees were kind of like the guys on talk radio. They didn't really want to have a discussion about any particular topic. They just wanted Jesus to make a statement that he would later regret.

If Jesus sided with the liberals on this issue his opponents would say, "See. This guy had no moral compass." And if sided with the conservatives they would say, "See. That Jesus has no compassion."

We all know that sometimes an argument often turns on how a question is asked. That's why there's been so much talk recently about the bias of the media. We have come to mistrust the objectivity of those who bring us the news. We have learned to be suspicious about the motives of those who ask the question.

And in the same way Jesus was suspicious of the motives of those who asked him questions. So instead of

answering the Pharisee's question in a straightforward way Jesus asks them about what the Law of Moses says about divorce. As we have already noted they answer the question easily and then Jesus makes them think more deeply.

Jesus says, "Why do you think Moses made that law about divorce? It was because you have hard hearts."

## HARD HEARTS

That's the reason that we have laws about divorce today. We too have hard hearts.

Our most important relationships can and do break down because of our sinful ways, and our laws are a way of trying to make divorce less harmful. One of the most painful aspects of divorce is that from a legal standpoint it's no longer about love and commitment. It's just about dividing up the stuff.

There's a commercial that's supposed to be funny portrays how the world would be different if lumberjacks ran the court system. The commercial shows a lumberjack judge telling other lumberjacks to cut the house in half and cut the boat in half and so forth. In doing this everything of value in the couple's life is destroyed.

From my perspective that's pretty much what happens when there is a divorce. Lives are chopped right down the middle, and it is never as easy as you think it's going to be.

Jesus answers the question that many divorced people ask, "Why does it hurt so much? Why can't I get over it?" It hurts so much because marriage is at the very heart of who we are. It is built into creation itself. The relationship between a man and a woman in marriage is indeed sacred.

As we say in the wedding ceremony, "... what God has joined together, let no one separate." Divorce is not a part of God's plan for your life. In fact when the Bible says that we are created in God's image, the next phrase is that he created us "male and female."

In other words the deep relationships we have with each other and in particular the relationship we have in marriage is a reflection of the divine in our life. We cannot laugh off our broken relationships. They are too powerful and important.

The marriage relationship, according to Jesus transcends even our relationship to our mother and father. It is God's design that we leave our family and create a new family.

## A THEOLOGY OF DIVORCE

That's the ideal. But, what happens when our relationships are shattered because of our hard hearts?

First, we need to remember that this is not what God wants for our lives. Divorce might be necessary in some cases, but it is never easy or desired. The primal pain of a broken relationship is not God's doing; it is the result of a fallen world. It is a result of sin.

Second, we need to ask if the relationship can be saved. Sometimes couples think that divorce is the easy way out, but they underestimate how much they have come to rely upon each other.

“Becoming one flesh” is the Bible's way of talking about a deep physical, emotional and spiritual bond that we form in marriage. Tearing that asunder is major emotional surgery. We may recover from that surgery, but things will always be different. Our life will always be colored by that experience.

It is always worth the effort to try and save a broken marriage.

Third, sometimes divorce is inevitable. I don't think that Jesus disagrees with Moses when it comes to divorce.

Though divorce is not the ideal is in some cases necessary due to the hardness of our hearts.

All of us are sinners. Our hearts are hard, and sometimes that means we need open heart surgery. Sometimes the life giving arteries are so clogged that this is the only option. And that's the option of divorce.

If a woman is being abused by her husband, you better believe I will tell her to hire a lawyer and get a restraining order. I won't hesitate because this is not what God wants marriage to be.

Many ministers have mistakenly used this passage as a way to coerce people into staying in dangerous relationships, and the results have been tragic. Marriage was not created by God to perpetuate abuse. Marriage was created to perpetuate love and wholeness.

Fourth, according to Jesus divorce is not permitted as a path to self-fulfillment. When the disciples are alone in the house they ask Jesus to talk some more about divorce, and Jesus tells them that divorce does not offer a loophole to justify adultery.

His strongest words are against those who use divorce to get something else. A spouse is not to be sacrificed to satisfy one's own desires or ambitions.

Jesus does something really radical for his time. He implies that what is good for the goose is good for the gander. Marriage is a relationship where responsibility is shared. The man and the woman both need to make sure that they do not sacrifice the marriage on the altar of adultery.

Society might not consider adultery to be a sin, but we do. Let the late night comic laugh about his sins and the sins of others. For us it is not a laughing matter.

## THE LONG ROAD TO FORGIVENESS

Now can adultery be forgiven? Of course it can. But, the key word is forgiven and not condoned. The cure is to confess our sin and pray for God's forgiveness.

I think a good biblical model might be the story of King David and Bathsheba. David took another man's wife and tried to cover it up by murdering her husband.

This is a very realistic story. A person of power imposes his will upon someone with less power for his own gratification. He tries to cover it up or smooth it over.

This leads to an even bigger mess. And the sin is magnified to the point that the original sin of adultery

harms a variety of people who had nothing to do with it in the first place.

In this case David's son Absalom in particular seems to learn from his father that the way to get ahead in life is just to take what you want. And this led to a civil war. David's son was killed and the country was weakened significantly.

David did confess his sin and ask for God's forgiveness, but that did not allow him to escape the historical consequences of his sin. People that he loved died prematurely and though David lived to be an old man this once brave warrior becomes a pathetic broken figure in the end.

David paid a very steep price for his adulterous ways, but (as it often is today) the worst crimes were committed in an attempt to cover up the sin. Jesus says that it is much better to call a sin a sin and ask for forgiveness. This is true of any sin, but it is particularly true when it comes to sins that affect others in such a deep way.

I have been personally involved with people who have committed grievous crimes because they could not ask for forgiveness and move on when a divorce was necessary. Divorce not only harms people financially, emotionally

and spiritually; it can also lead to criminal actions on the part of one or both partners.

If anyone in you or anyone in your family does need to get a divorce, don't waste time trying to figure out who was the "innocent" and who was the "guilty" party. We all fall short of God's glory. We all fall short of who we're meant to be.

And we can't control what anyone else does. But, we can control what we do. We can confess our sins and trust God to help us move in a different direction. It's a long and difficult road, but with God's help we can get better instead of bitter.

## HELP FOR THE DIVORCED

What can we do as a family of faith to help those who have suffered the tragedy of divorce?

We can provide counseling and support groups. We can take marriage seriously and try to help our young people understand that marriage is not a bond that is easily undone.

(I have sometimes wondered if it might be a good idea to have people who have worked through a hard divorce to talk to young couples contemplating marriage about what

can happen when those vows are not taken seriously ... sort of a scared straight program for newlyweds!)

But, I also know that we cannot really predict or control what happens in a marriage. There were couples I married that I thought were the perfect couple with all the advantages. And within a year they were divorced.

And then there was the young couple in one of my churches that ran away from home to get married in another state (since they were too young to get married in the state where they lived). Neither one had a job or much experience.

The parents of the bride tracked them down and wanted the marriage annulled. But, the couple and the minister of their home church persuaded the parents to let them make a go of it. I knew this “young” couple some 40 years later. She had gone through college and had become a nurse, and he was a computer specialist. It was one of the happiest and most successful marriages I had ever seen.

No, I’m afraid that as much as we would like to prevent the tragedy of divorce through programs and requirements, in most cases it won’t work. People are going to do what they want to do.

But, the church can become a powerful healing force for broken people after the damage is done.

Jesus had a reason for being so strict about divorce. He wanted to protect the vulnerable.

For the majority of women in Jesus' day, survival depended on being a part of a household. A woman without a husband and perhaps with children would be homeless and in grave danger.

That's why the law provided that the husband should give the wife a certificate of divorce. It would explain why this woman was without a man and would be a defense against rumor and slander. (You'll remember that this was what Joseph was going to do for Mary before he was given different instructions by the messenger of God.)

Anyway the point of this law was to mitigate the pain for the vulnerable and provide safe haven for those who had been wounded. I think that is the role the church should play. Our job as a community is to provide a place of safe haven for those who have been broken by life. We are a hospital for sinners. And guess what? We all need health insurance because we all will need treatment at one time or another.

I think it is no coincidence that the next passage in Mark's gospel (which is also included in our lesson for today) is

yet another passage about the children coming to Jesus. In this passage parents are bringing children to Jesus for his blessing. But, the disciples don't think that it's a good idea. In fact they "speak sternly" to those who have brought their little ones to Jesus.

And once again Jesus is angry with his disciples. The Bible tells us that he was "indignant". The word also means to grieve and to feel pain. The disciples still didn't get it. The kingdom of God was about welcoming the children, the little ones. The kingdom of God was about putting your arms around those who were most vulnerable.

And that's exactly what Jesus did.

And I think that's what we are called to do as well. We are to be a community of compassion that seeks to heal broken hearts and offer hope to those on the outside looking in. And that especially includes those whose lives have been harmed by the tragedy of divorce.

Today we take communion. It is a symbol of forgiveness. We take our broken lives to the one whose body was broken for us. We take our spilled dreams to the one whose blood was spilled for us.

And he puts his arms around us and blesses us and leads us home.

Let us once again go to the throne of grace and remember what we need to remember. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Amen.