

Reading from the Gospels: Mark 10:2-16

Sermon

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I remember the very first time I sat down with a young couple and did marriage counseling. I was serving as a supply pastor during my senior year of seminary at a small church in west Georgia. The mother of the bride to be was on the session and introduced me to her daughter and future son-in-law.

The wedding was scheduled for early June, just after my graduation from Columbia. Since I wasn't ordained, another pastor would step in during the ceremony and make the "official" pronouncement. They were so young ... neither had completed college, but they were ready to tackle the world together.

Armed with my list of 100 questions for pre-marital counseling, I embarked on a step by step journey with them that lasted three sessions. We talked about all kinds of things ... money ... children ... checkbooks ... in-laws ... holidays ... family traditions ... and, with a little apprehension ... we even talked about the subject of sex and marriage. They were so young ... and I was so inexperienced.

Well ... somehow I determined that they were ready to tie the knot. They seemed to answer all the questions properly or at least they seemed willing to hear me preach to them about those myriad subjects of marriage. After all, I remembered, the minister who counseled Susan and me before our own marriage just told us to always communicate and we'd be fine. I certainly told this young couple a whole lot more than that. They were so young when they married ... they soon had a child ... they got divorced not long after.

And I wondered ... was there something else I should have said ... something I should have asked them ... what did I miss? And I have to admit ... the words Jesus spoke to his disciples haunted me ... "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Some of my colleagues asked me this week why I would want to preach on this passage. Just because it was the lectionary reading, certainly there was something else I could preach about regarding the theme of World Communion. How did this passage fit in with Christians all over the world celebrating the Lord's Supper? So I decided to pray about it ... and to sit alone for a bit ... maybe Jesus was trying to tell us something that wasn't so much like a rule for living ... but a way of living.

Listen with me now to the word of our Lord from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, verses 2-16.

10:2 Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

10:3 He answered them, "What did Moses command you?"

10:4 They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her."

10:5 But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.

10:6 But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.'

10:7 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,

10:8 and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

10:9 Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

10:10 Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.

10:11 Jesus said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her;

10:12 and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

10:13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.

10:14 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.

10:15 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

10:16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

These words spoken by Jesus have been used for centuries to punish people who have been divorced. At first read they seem like an ironclad law that leaves no wiggle room ... no loop holes ... once you're divorced, if you remarry, then you've committed adultery. Ouch!

I can just imagine how many women and men over the years have stayed in a terrible marriage out of fear that Christ Jesus himself forbade them from divorcing and remarrying. However ... I believe we need to look a bit closer At what is going on when Jesus has this conversation ... first with some Pharisees and then with his own disciples.

Unfortunately, for some in this world, the life of women and children during ancient Palestine is not so much unlike it is today. At the beginning of the first century, even like it was during the time of Moses, men ruled the world. As a matter of fact, if you look back at Deuteronomy, it seems Moses granted carte blanche to the men of his time.

If they wanted to divorce a woman ... they could just write it up and turn it in and it was done. She was history ... gone ... and he was free to move on to his next concubine. As for the woman ... she found herself at the bottom of society ... no support ... all alone ... no one to look after her. She was a marked woman.

But, according to Jesus, Moses wrote this law only because of the “hardness of the hearts of men.” And herein lies the key to what Jesus is trying to tell the Pharisees and his own disciples. It’s not about rules and regulations. A true covenant is not based on rules ... it’s based on a mutually loving relationship. What Jesus is actually upset about is how we deceive each other ... how we enter into covenants with hardened hearts. Divorce is not even the key issue.

What Jesus is trying to say is that a covenantal relationship ... any covenantal relationship ... marriage or any promise made before God ... is holy in the sight of God. And if you enter a covenantal relationship with no intentions of upholding it ... or of ignoring it ... or bending the rules to just suit your carnal ways ... then when you do divorce and remarry it is tantamount to adultery.

Entering a holy covenant is not something that you just do ... it requires a recommitment in your relationship with Jesus Christ ... because you won’t be able to make it last all by yourself ... you will have to rely on Christ to make it work.

Now I need to make an important point here. This is important to hear ... I do not believe Christ wanted anyone to stay in an abusive marriage ... a marriage in which one partner has absolute power over the other partner ... or a narcissistic relationship based only on the needs of one against the other ... Christ never condoned a relationship in which one partner emotionally or physically abused the other.

Because when one partner treats the other in any hideous or abusive way ... and the couple divorces ... then I believe Christ is telling us that the abusive partner is committing adultery when he or she remarries because a covenant has been broken. That’s a perfect example of a hardened heart.

A true marriage covenant therefore ... made before the Lord ... is the very inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. That’s because the Kingdom of God is not founded upon rules and regulations and sacrifices at the temple. The Kingdom of God is not founded on Thou Shalts and Thou Shalt Nots ... The Kingdom of God is ushered in by loving relationships of respect ... of compassion ... of hope ... it begins as a journey that leads each individual to a realization of the joy and essence of unconditional love that only finds its fulfillment in a relationship with Christ.

And when such a relationship is created ... it will be able to weather the storms of life ... the

crises that accompany every couple ... the fears ... the mistakes ... even the flaws of character. And in the sunset years of life ... the joy and love experienced is a model to the world of the very love of Christ. It makes me wonder what the world would be like if all relationships were first built upon a relationship with Christ?

Unfortunately, that is not always the case. If you think about it, the world of the First Century and that of the 21st Century are really not that different. Laws still enable covenants ... holy covenants as well as secular contracts ... to be broken very easily. When you enter into a marital relationship with pre-nuptial agreements or even with the flippant thought that if this doesn't work out, it can always be ended ... then the heart of a relationship is often doomed from the start.

The preparation to enter such a covenant is lacking. That's when there is a hardness of heart ... a lack of dedication. And it is those types of broken covenants that Christ speaks out against. Entering a holy union is not something to be taken lightly ... it requires immense discipline ... compromise and a lot of work through all the ups and downs of life. There will be challenges to face ... there will be tragedies to overcome ... there will be times to give and times to receive.

That's the heart of a relationship embraced in God's covenant. But what Jesus is trying to tell us actually goes so much further than just marital covenants. The heart of his message is actually how we ALL relate to one another ... not just husband and wife ... but in all of our relationships in this world. In the time of Jesus and in ours ... there are still too many walls dividing people ... too many loopholes so we don't have to associate with every kind of people ... too many ways to justify our actions or lack of actions in this world.

In other words, there are just too many ways that we can divorce ourselves from our responsibilities as children of God. Our insatiable need to acquire more and more things has led to the rise of child sweat shops in developing countries to fill our consumer demands.

When we buy and buy without regard to the process that produces what we want ... we divorce ourselves from our responsibilities as children of God. Our lack of compassion for those who aren't in our same social or economic class continues to push the levels of poverty to some of the highest levels seen in years ... when we ignore the needs of those who are homeless ... those who live day to day on handouts and charity ... we divorce ourselves from our responsibilities as children of God.

When we ignore the social justice issues of our time ... horrible conditions that exist right here in DeKalb County and throughout Metro Atlanta ... child sex trafficking ... embarrassing illiteracy rates ... thousands of children in Foster Care programs ... mothers and fathers abandoning children ... minimum wages that keep the cycle of poverty from being broken ... we divorce ourselves from our responsibilities as children of God.

When we neglect our world ... when we don't take the time to recycle ... to save energy ... to conserve water ... to cut down on our use of products that poison the world ... than we divorce ourselves from our responsibilities as children of God.

The sad fact is ... Jesus recognized that our hearts are often hardened ... both in his day and in ours.

The false gods of our world pull and pull at us ... tempting us with wealth and power and lust. And when we fall into those traps ... we in essence ... divorce ourselves from God's covenant ... we turn our backs on God and on God's children.

So Jesus simply tells us ... "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. What an image that is ... Children ... all the children of this world ... those who are dependent on others ... the least of these ... and those so in need of a relationship.

You see, a marriage covenant is but one type of holy covenant. As a matter of fact, not all will enter it. But the covenant we do enter when we accept Jesus into our lives and follow him as a disciple into the world ... means that we, too, like Christ, are called to serve all the children of the world ... the forgotten ... the shamed ... the lame ... the homeless ... the poor ... the widow ... because Jesus came into this world to share his unconditional love with those whom the world seems to have so little love to give.

We don't do it because a rule tells us to do it ... we do it because we respond to the grace and love Christ pours into our lives. That's why on this day ... World Communion Sunday ... we will gather at the Lord's Table ... because it is Jesus who invites us.

At this table we will be invited to stand with all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds and all kinds of ethnicities ... it is a table that levels the playing field of the world and calls us to reach out in unconditional love to share what we have with each other ... particularly with those who have so little ... and then to be willing to accept from them the love and grace they will give back to us.

At this table ... we recommit our lives to God's covenant on our lives.

Let us pray:

Across this wide world, we shall always find

Those who are crying with no peace of mind,

But when we help them, or when we feed them,

We belong to God ... we belong to God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.