

“When the Glue Doesn’t Hold”

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October 8, 2006
Text: Mark 10:2-12

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At Stephanie and Drew’s wedding last weekend, someone asked me how many weddings I had officiated at. I checked my records this week, and I’ve officiated at approximately 215 weddings in 25 years of ministry. I was reminded of the story about the young pastor faced with his first wedding ceremony. He sought counsel from an older colleague. The experienced pastor told the young man everything he needed to do and then made one final suggestion: “If you ever forget what you’re supposed to say,” he advised, “just quote Scripture. It’s always appropriate and you never go wrong quoting the Bible.”

The young minister did a splendid job in conducting the wedding ceremony, until he pronounced the young couple husband and wife. At that point, his mind went blank. He didn’t know what to say, but then remembered the advice of the old preacher to quote Scripture. So he quoted the only verse that came to mind: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Some of us got married at an age when we didn’t really know what we were doing. We were too young to know ourselves, too much in love to seriously object to any weakness in our beloved, and totally naive of what it really means to be married.

My folks have been married for 62 years – they’ve weathered stormy times, stayed together, and worked out difficulties. As a child, I couldn’t even imagine that I would have a brother or sister who would be divorced. However, of the six children in my family, three have been divorced. Divorce is all around us – most of us have been affected by it – ourselves, family, friends. It is a reality of society, and as prevalent as divorce is, you’d think divorce would be discussed in church, certainly from the pulpit. A survey of published sermons tells me most preachers prefer to stay away from Jesus’ words about divorce. Even resources I consult for help in sermon preparation steered away from talking about divorce in today’s text – suggesting that the sermon should explore “the four secrets of enduring love.” I know the intentions of authors and preachers is entirely kind and pastoral, but there is not one divorced person in the church who forgets the words of Jesus or escapes their sting. What are those words?

According to Mark, Jesus journeys beyond Jordan as he approaches his final entry into Jerusalem. But although He has moved into new territory, Jesus continues to confront the same establishment adversaries and to battle the same obstinate ignorance of His disciples. The Pharisees are still trying to trap him – he’s being tested again. Jesus is asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” The Pharisees expected Him to side either with the liberals who believed a man could divorce his wife for virtually any reason – burned toast, too much salt in food, or insulting the husband’s parents; or Jesus would side with the conservatives, who believed that only in the case of a woman’s adultery could a divorce take place. Jesus refuses to get caught in the trap and instead counters with, “What did Moses command you?” The Pharisees are quick to provide the legal precedent commonly recognized throughout Judaism. Divorce law required a Jewish man to write out a divorce certificate in front of witnesses, sign it, and deliver it to his wife in person announcing, “Here is your bill of divorce.”

Jesus denounces the standard legal practice and proclaims that it’s not divinely sanctioned, but was merely Moses’ attempt to deal with obstinate people. In other words, it wasn’t God who allowed men to divorce or dismiss their wives, it was Moses. The Pharisees want to know what’s allowed. Jesus deals instead with what God intends. God intends for a marriage to be the formation of a new entity – a new family unit. A man and a woman are joined together – the word “joined” is translated from the Greek which means “glued to.” A husband and wife are glued together. And what God has brought together should not be separated. Jesus based His teaching on the relationship of Adam and Eve and here quotes the second chapter of Genesis. A husband and wife are to become like parts of the same body, sensing each other’s pain and joy as if these feelings were their own and caring for each other as much as they care for themselves.

A married couple is in God’s eyes a “one flesh” reality. Because that’s true, divorce is a kin to cutting into a living organism. We are not talking about dissolving a business partnership that’s gone sour – its more like amputating an arm or losing a lung. Divorce cuts into the heart and soul of a one-flesh unity. Yes, it’s possible to survive the operation, but let us be unmistakably clear that we’re talking about major surgery – not just a minor out-patient procedure. That’s why couples who experience difficulties in their marriage must try everything they can to resolve conflict within the context of the marriage before divorce is even mentioned. As Chuck Swindoll says, “There are two processes that ought never to be entered into prematurely – embalming and divorce.”

Jesus opposed the divorce practices of His day, because, (1) divorce conflicts with what God intends. Forget what Moses allowed. What does God will for marriage? God's intention from the beginning of creation was that a man and woman become one flesh and remain that way.

(2) Jesus opposed the divorce practices of His day for exactly the same reason that Moses first instituted a bill of divorcement – and that was to protect the woman who was utterly defenseless and trapped by a destructive and evil practice. There was great harm done to women in Jesus' day by divorce. The very word for divorce is literally "to throw away," and women could be thrown away by a very simple procedure that didn't involve a court of law or a religious organization. Only witnesses were involved and they could be the husband's witnesses. No legal charges needed to be brought; it was simply a matter of handing the woman a bill of divorcement that said she was divorced for certain reasons, and those reasons could be almost anything, from speaking out of turn to kicking the dog.

The woman was trapped in the patriarchal world of the first century. And Jesus was opposing this evil practice of throwing women away. In attacking the disregard for a person who was by ancient law treated as property (sexual property) to be moved about, Jesus was saying that any man who divorces his wife makes her an adulteress. What He was saying was is that a woman who was thrown out into the street had only one way to make a living.

She might live for some time on her dowry – provided her husband hadn't kept it (which was permitted). She might return to her parents' home, if they were still living and able to take her in. Or she might live with other relatives. The one thing we need to see from all of this, I think, is that Jesus wasn't trying to set down a legalistic set of rules to determine when a divorce was allowable. He wasn't establishing rules at all. He was striking at the spirit in which people live with each other. What we need to hear is Jesus' concern for human relationships. The same is true for Jesus' statements regarding remarriage.

"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her." In that day, a man could drop a woman or take up a woman at a whim, and Jesus is striking at this destructive attitude of male domination. Jesus condemns the callousness by which a man would marry and divorce and remarry in the same case as he might buy and sell cattle. In fact, in Jesus' day, a good cow would bring a higher price than a woman on the open market! Jesus is calling attention to the degraded relationship that existed between a man and a woman when the woman had been previously married. It was indeed a degraded and degrading relationship, it kept woman in perpetual fear, constantly in a corner. The man had her under his power, which made it easy for him to abuse her. In first century culture a divorced woman was viewed as a second hand woman and Jesus was saying that when a man thinks of a woman as a cheap commodity he has her in a vicious relationship. Jesus therefore speaks of remarriage as adultery, not because there was anything inherently wrong with it, but because of the attitude of contempt with which the man lived with the woman. Jesus points to the destruction done to the relationship and condemns it. Once again, Jesus is concerned about relationships. We share Jesus' concern about relationships and most of us would agree that God's intention from the beginning is for marriage to be a permanent "one flesh" reality. But we live in an imperfect world.

I'm certain that there are some couples here this morning who have experienced some dark days in their marriage, when the option of divorce at one time or another crossed the mind or the lips. There are many here this morning who know what it feels like to have a marriage poised to enter the valley of the shadow of death. And sometimes, despite all efforts, a marriage enters that valley. Every resource has been utilized – every means to bring healing and wholeness and restoration has been exhausted. Still the marriage is immersed in destruction and bitterness. When such is the case, I believe the law of the gospel of love dictates that divorce should occur. When it's clear that the continuation of the marriage is far more destructive than ending the relationship, then I believe the marriage has to end.

Is this text from Mark about marriage or divorce or love? I think the answer to that question is "Yes." It's about all three. The scripture reminds us of the need for love in all our relationships – unselfish, unconditional love which seeks what's best for the other person. The text speaks of the sacredness and value of marriage, and is a reminder that we must give time and energy to nurturing and strengthening the marriage relationship. We must work on our marriage relationships and the church must provide opportunities for that to happen.

This text is also a reminder to those couples experiencing marital difficulties that divorce isn't something we turn to just because we are having trouble in our marriage or because we have "fallen out of

love” with our spouse or fallen in love with someone else. Christian marriage is a one flesh union, a single organism, and we split it asunder only when no other option is open to us. It is a last ditch solution after every possible means of grace has been exhausted.

So what does the church say to a divorced person today? Randall Nichols is a divorced pastor and family therapist and the author of *Ending Marriage, Keeping Faith*:

He offers this wisdom about the “magical flavor” often ascribed to the wedding vows: “The promises are broken now, but what worries me is the feeling I sense that somehow these promises were supposed to have been immune from the human brokenness that all of us share as a common spiritual legacy;” that “the language of the marriage rite could or should have insulated us from the often horrifying reality of being human.”

The failed wedding vows point to a deeper reality: “It is not so much a breaker of promises that I look at in the mirror as it is a broken human being.” Nichols goes on to say, “The part of divorce that can be a spiritual journey is just this experience of brokenness and eventually healing, this coming face-to-face with the fact that I was not after all protected by an envelope of magical words but rather that I tried my best, failed, and for all that am neither destroyed nor worthless in the eyes of God.”

Later, Nichols says, “Neither Jesus nor the early church wanted marriages to end in divorce, any more than anyone today wants that agony, no matter how much of a relief it may eventually turn out to be. But I also know that the final word of scripture is not about broken covenants but renewed ones, not about judgment but about mercy, not about falling away from a wrathful God but being gathered up in the arms of a loving one.”

Christian sisters and brothers, brokenness in divorce or in any form is not God’s final word. Forgiveness is – new creation is, hope is, healing is. Deep in our lives where the Spirit calls to us, we find judgment and brokenness overwhelmed by a greater power. We bind our wounds, forgive others, forgive ourselves, and we seek God’s forgiveness and strength and blessing for a brand new start.

Let us pray. Thank you, God, for being a God of grace and mercy and second chances.

Thanks to Richard Foster and others for their insight into this topic.