

A Shared Life
University United Methodist Church – 11:00am Chapel Service
Rev. Paul Dubois
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Scripture – Mark 10:1-16

He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them.

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

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

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

A Shared Life

Divorce, as a severed relationship, is an act of humankind, not an act of God

Most of us pastors at University United Methodist Church preach from the Revised Common Lectionary, a three-year cycle of readings that span the Bible. This year we've been journeying through the Gospel of Mark; next year it will be Luke. We pastors don't have to follow the lectionary, but it helps to give us some continuity; it helps to keep us from preaching the same thing over and over; and it compels us to preach on passages that are easy to avoid. Today, for instance, we have one of those passages. Today the Gospel confronts us with divorce.

Well, maybe that's not exactly true. In today's Gospel, it is the Pharisees that confront Jesus with divorce. That is, it is we human beings who have placed divorce before God. After all, the Pharisees weren't really interested in divorce. They were interested in testing Jesus, or trapping him. The question of divorce was simply the means. But Jesus isn't all that interested in talking about divorce. He never raises the issue. Both times in the passage, the question

about divorce is raised by others—first by the Pharisees, then by his own disciples. It's not that he doesn't have passionate feelings about the matter—it is clear that he does. But it seems that Jesus is interested in lifting the veil from our eyes, to showing us something new, or correcting our vision, our understanding of the reality he offers us. Divorce is not a part of that vision.

No one who enters into a marriage wants it to end in divorce. No one who enters into a relationship wants it to end in this way. Not everyone who enters into a relationship necessarily wants it to end in marriage or a committed monogamous relationship, either, but they certainly don't enter into a relationship hoping to be hurt—a devastating, lifetime of hurt. But, frankly, there's not an easy way to speak of divorce. There are times, when we may come to believe that given all of the frailties of human life, divorce is the least worst option. But there's not a way to speak of divorce without facing the pain of a broken relationship between two persons. There is not a way to speak of divorce without anger and betrayal, without fear, and without shame. There is not a way to speak of divorce without looking at the others who are caught up in the pain... children, friends, relatives, communities.

But before we go too far down this road, consider this: In the 4th chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well. This woman was not a Jew, but a Samaritan (the Jews and the Samaritans had a relationship like Yankees and Confederates... one people separated by a common history). As the woman and Jesus talked, we learn that she had had five husbands, and the man she was with now was not her husband... and yet, Jesus offers her the water of life, the promise that if she drinks what he gives her, she will never die. This woman, the Samaritan woman at the well, who had many husbands and is with a man who is not her husband, is considered by some to be the first Christian, for she sought the living water, and her response to finding the Messiah was to share the good news with her friends.

The Gospel never leads us down a dark and narrow path without the hope and promise of light at the end. The journey can—and will—be dangerous. But we do not, ever, journey alone. We have one another, and we have Jesus Christ.

But perhaps we should start at the beginning, in the first chapter of Genesis...

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.

...

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them...

This is where our story really begins, here at the beginning, at God's moment of creation out of nothing, the cosmos coming into being simply through God willing it to be. The glory and beauty and perfection of God's creation ... lasts all of two chapters in Genesis. Before the

snake. Before the fruit. Before the fall. Our story may begin at Genesis chapter 1 verse 1, but it gets interesting at Chapter 3. It gets interesting, when it becomes human.

God has a vision for creation. A hope. We humans—in our particular traditions as Jews and then Christians—have articulated our understanding of God’s vision in several ways. At first, it was Eden. The perfect, harmonious garden, the center of the cosmos, the center of life; where God roamed to and fro, and where Adam and Eve were naked, but not ashamed. Later, when the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt, the vision was articulated as the promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Even later, as exiles in Babylon, our hope in God’s vision became understood as Jerusalem, the shining city on a hill, where we hoped to return, the city where God and the people of God will reside. In the New Testament, Jesus unveils the Kingdom of God not as a remote and distant place but as a near and present reality that is within our grasp, that is revealed in day-to-day sacred encounters with one another and with God.

In our scriptures, there is another pattern that illuminates God’s vision for creation, and that pattern is marriage. Now, marriage is not the only possible sacred relationship between two people, but it is one, and it does tell us something about the Kingdom of God. The scripture says,

“a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh.”

One plus one is one... but that one is bigger than the two. A marriage is a relationship that is greater than the sum of the two people who enter into it. It is a foundation for beginning and building. It is the kernel of community. A church is bigger than the people who are members. This service of worship, here today, is something more than the sum of we people gathered together, because God has joined us together.

But God’s vision for creation doesn’t always take hold in our hearts. We tend to have our own visions. We were banished from Eden because we desired to be like God, and we were denied the promised land because we chose to create our own God. Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God was so compelling... we crucified him. And marriage? We sued for divorce.

And this brings us to the Pharisees.

It’s not clear whether or not divorce was a pressing issue for the Pharisees. In 1st century Judea only the husband could divorce the wife; the wife had no such rights. The Pharisees may have been concerned, however, by the mores of the dominant Greco-Roman culture of the day, which allowed either the husband or wife to obtain a divorce. And so the Pharisees may have hoped to put Jesus in the position of having to choose between tradition (only the husband could divorce the wife) or the contemporary cultural mores (both parties could divorce.) But, true to form, Jesus says no to both.

To the Pharisees, Jesus says divorce isn't what you think it is—the Pharisees were again confusing their own tradition with the will of God. Tradition seemed to give a man the right to divorce his wife, but Jesus says this is not so. Instead, it was the hardened heart that has chosen divorce. In response, the Law in Deuteronomy actually gives the woman a small amount of protection... the Law forces the husband to make the divorce public by giving the woman a writ of divorce... a document that frees her and allows her to marry again. It's not perfect, but it is something. This may not seem like much to us now, but it was huge in ancient Palestine.

But to his disciples, Jesus also seems to say that divorce doesn't do for you what you think it does. Somehow, it doesn't fully sever the relationship. And this is where we have a problem. We know of relationships in which, frankly, there is not much evidence of God. There's lots of evidence of fear, enmity, violence, or, simply, passive-aggressiveness, but no sign of God. Has God really joined these two together? Jesus doesn't come across to us as one who is a stickler for the law... perhaps there is something else going on here... something that makes this passage about not just marriage, but our new life in Christ, also.

What God has joined together, let no one separate.

What, exactly, has God joined together? From Paul's Letter to the Romans we read,

'So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.'

And here we are back to God's vision of creation, and our re-creation in Christ. A vision of the Kingdom of God.

I can rather easily articulate my connectedness to my own wife and children. I can also rather easily live into my connection with each of you. After all, we come together week-after-week to worship, and to commune with the Lord. Some of us serve together in other ways. I can experience God's presence in these moments together. But I am challenged here by the Gospel. The Body of Christ to which I am a member includes some—many—that were it my choice I would not be joined to. There are those who sow fear. Those who sow hate. Those who sow violence. There are some I just don't like, or whose values are not my values. Whose society is not my society. Do you mean to tell me, Jesus, that I am married to them?

We can issue all of the divorce decrees against those with whom we differ... but if we act in betrayal of those relationships—those sacred and eternal relationships among one another... those relationships born of the body and blood of Jesus Christ—then we have denied Christ.

Jesus doesn't want to gain disciples only to lose them. Jesus is in this relationship for the long run. Indeed, we cannot divorce Jesus from our lives... he won't give us the writ. He will always be present with us, always be available. He may get angry with us... and we with

him... but we cannot undo what God has done in and through Jesus Christ, for us personally or for creation as a whole. God has entered into the human condition through Jesus. Indeed, we are the bride of Christ. None of us will ever be the same again.