

Sermon: Receive the Kingdom of God

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Genesis 2:18-24; Mark 10:2-16**

Having once endured a divorce proceeding, I can tell you that it is an unpleasant pain in the neck. It is costly, time-consuming, and emotionally draining, and that is in a best-case scenario. On the other hand, I once had a sister-in-law who had a plaque on her kitchen wall, and it read, ‘Better to have loved and lost than to have lived your whole damn life with HIM.’

In 2016, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention counted 2,245,404 marriages nationwide. That includes all marriages whether they last fifteen minutes or a hundred years. For the same year, 44 states and the District of Columbia reported 827,261 divorces, a little less than forty percent.

According to the American Psychological Association, ‘Healthy marriages are good for couples’ mental and physical health. They are also good for children; growing up in a happy home protects children from mental, physical, educational and social problems.’ The flip side, of course, is that a bad marriage is bad for everybody.

For better or worse, in our culture, we can say that divorce is somewhat normal. This is not the case in other countries, such as in Ireland, which required a constitutional amendment to legalize divorce there, in 1995. Divorce in Italy has only been legal since 1970. If you want to get a divorce in Italy, marry a non-Italian and get divorced somewhere else; otherwise, it’s complicated.

Meanwhile, in Israel, divorce has been known and accepted for centuries, according to the Bible. The process is still pretty much the same today as it was then.

Recently, an Israeli rabbinical court sanctioned a Jewish woman in a divorce case. The woman has, for over eight years, declined to accept a religious bill of divorce, called a *get*.¹ Under Jewish law, a marriage cannot be dissolved unless the man consents to give a *get* and the woman accepts it. Rabbinical courts cannot force a man to give his wife a

get or for the wife to approve it, but they can impose sanctions, including jail and public shaming, on someone the judges determine is unjustly withholding a divorce.

Sanctions are rare, and, until now, have only been imposed on men. This is ‘the first time in the history of the rabbinical courts’ that a sanction has been directed against a woman divorce-refuser.

There are plenty of good, solid reasons for a person to seek a divorce. In the U.S., infidelity, money, and lack of communication are the top three. Domestic violence and abuse rank tenth, according to Marriage.com.²

The Book of Deuteronomy, in the only passage in the Torah that deals with divorce, states, ‘Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house’ (Deuteronomy 24:1). The rest of the passage includes some conditions and examples, but that is basically it: a man can divorce a woman for any reason.

When the Pharisees challenge Jesus about the lawfulness of a man divorcing his wife, he in turns asks them what Moses said about it. The fact that they already knew the Scripture in question proves that this was just another attempt to test and trap Jesus, and instead, they opened themselves up to a critique from him.

Given the prevalence of divorce in our modern-day culture, this passage tends to make our skin crawl when we hear Jesus say, essentially, that he’s against divorce. It is partly because of this passage that divorce was impossible to get in Western Europe for so long, unless you were a king or a prince of renown who also had deep pockets.

But Jesus has his reasons and, as usual, he puts a new spin on the topic.

A certificate of divorce in the first century provided legal protection for a woman against claims by her former husband and it enabled her to start a new life either on her own or by marrying someone else. But she was stuck if her husband’s heart was hardened against a divorce, and that goes all the way back to Moses.

Jesus goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden before the Fall. Citing Genesis, he said that ‘what *God* has joined together, let no man separate.’ Who hasn’t heard that or something similar at someone’s wedding? For Jesus, when a man and a woman become one, it is akin to Adam and Eve being reunited in the Garden.

Notice that it was God who joined them together, not some priest or rabbi or pastor. And, of all the reasons for divorce, Jesus focuses on adultery, and I think that should inform what we hear when he says ‘let no man separate’ a married couple. He may be talking about a third party breaking up a marriage, and that’s not allowed. It’s so important, God included it as one of the top Ten Commandments.

In Proverbs, adultery is described as something done by someone who lacks sense: ‘[He] who does it destroys himself. He will get wounds and dishonor, and his disgrace will not be wiped away. For jealousy makes a man furious, and he will not spare when he takes revenge. He will accept no compensation; he will refuse though you multiply gifts’ (Proverbs 6:33-35).

In Matthew’s Gospel, someone approaches Jesus and asks what he needs to do to gain eternal life. Jesus said, ‘If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.’ ‘Which ones?’ the man asked. And Jesus answered, ‘You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness’ (Matthew 19:16-18).

These are all the commandments that cause harm to our neighbors when we fail to keep them. God is only trying to protect us from ourselves.

Divorce was a cultural reality in the first century, and Jesus knew it. The Pharisees interpret the law rightly, but to the detriment of women. But here, radically, Jesus made it a two-way street when he said that a woman could initiate a divorce and be equally protected by the law. Most of the women who followed Jesus – Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, for example – were single. It could be they just hadn’t married yet, or they could also have been previously divorced and were now living independently. Jesus would have known first-hand the effects of adultery and divorce in his community. His point of view is very much in line with God’s point of view.

And just as Jesus sees equality in marriage, he sees value in little children. It’s no surprise that Mark follows a passage about marriage with one about children, because women and children were especially vulnerable in this culture.

A few weeks ago, we heard Jesus say that when you welcome the lowest of society in his name, you are welcoming both him and God the Father as well. Now, we see people bringing little children to Jesus that they might touch him. This happens elsewhere in the Gospels, where people instinctively reach out to touch Jesus.

The focus in this passage is on how we receive God's Kingdom. It must be received as a gift, and children, who are dependent on others for nearly everything, regard everything as a gift. It's a simple teaching in two sentences from Jesus. And then he gives the kids a hug, lays hands on them, and gives them God's blessing.

There's a stereotype out there that says when people have been married long enough, they begin finishing sentences for each other. In our house, we're beginning to merge each other's *memories*, such that my wife sometimes tells stories that happened to me as if they actually happened to her. For me, that's a good thing because now I don't have to remember them myself, and I can make up new ones and tell them as if they were hers. In a nutty sort of way, we enjoy our own kind of unity.

And yet, we remain separate people. We're dependent on each other but we often move in our own orbits too. We don't think of ourselves as a stereotypical couple; we're just Us, and I believe that that is true for every relationship.

In today's readings, Jesus gives us the big picture: he recognizes that a narrow reading of the Law is a compromise between God's covenant with Adam and Eve and our human frailty in dealing with particular contexts and circumstances. He also gives us a new aspect of discipleship that includes family however we define it for ourselves.

When we honor and care for each other, when we respect each other, whether or not we are part of anything that could be called a 'traditional' family, we are fulfilling God's creative purpose for us. At the same time, Jesus says that we will receive the Kingdom as a gift, and not just as a child would, but as the lowliest in society would, receiving it as an unbelievable blessing from the God who made us. We are reminded of this promise every time we meet Jesus at his Table in fellowship and in peace.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-first-rabbinical-court-sanctions-woman-for-refusing-divorce/>, accessed 5 October 2018.

² <https://www.marriage.com/advice/divorce/10-most-common-reasons-for-divorce/>, accessed 5 October 2018.