



SUNDAY SERMON

## On Divorce: Living with Hope in the Real World

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Raise your hand if you came to church this morning hoping to talk about divorce. Nope. Me neither.

Raise your hand if all the important relationships in your life are grace-filled and life-giving. A few. God bless you.

Raise your hand if you came eager to hear some Good News, to be strengthened, inspired, fed by the love of God? Yes. Me too.

Okay. Let's see what we can do – because we have Jesus saying, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery!"

I don't need any special insight to know that most everybody here has had an intimate experience with divorce, if not in your own marriage, then within your family or circle of close friends. With divorce comes pain, shame, disappointment – in ourselves, in others – even when divorce is the healthiest option in the given circumstances.

All of us – divorced, single, married, never-married, remarried, widowed, partnered – whether we are cisgender, transgender, gay, bisexual, lesbian, old, young.... All of us live with two truths: With the truth given in Genesis that we are created for life in relationship and union with one another. And with the truth Jesus addresses: the reality of fracture and broken relationships. Thus, we're given a vision of wholeness and the reality of division – an all too familiar, if painful, context that feels relevant given current divisions in the fabric of our society.

But let's begin at the beginning: The Book of Genesis has two stories, two versions of the creation of humankind. This one speaks of how the first person God made from the dust was alone and needed a partner. None of the birds or animals would do, so God took a rib from the man and from it created a woman. And they became one flesh.

Let me undo inaccurate readings of this passage employed to give man dominion over woman. Two words: "Adam," the first man. *Adam, adama*, is a play on the word for earth. *Adam* is a word that means humanity; it does not have gender. The first person becomes gendered – male – only

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DATE  
Pentecost 20  
Sunday, Oct. 7, 2018

PREACHER  
The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

Genesis 2:18-24  
Mark 10:2-9

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in contrast to the creation of another – female. As there is no darkness without light, neither is there male without female, neither is there one without an other. Second, the word “helper,” used to describe the second person. Helper does not mean subservient; in other instances, the word helper is used to describe God! The subordination of women is a human ordering, not a biblical part of God’s creation. Full stop.

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Let me undo inaccurate readings of this passage employed to give man dominion over woman. Two words: “Adam,” the first man. *Adam, adama*, is a play on the word for earth. *Adam* is a word that means humanity; it does not have gender. The first person becomes gendered – male – only in contrast to the creation of another – female. As there is no darkness without light, neither is there male without female, neither is there one without an other. Second, the word “helper,” used to describe the second person. Helper does not mean subservient; in other instances, the word helper is used to describe God! The subordination of women is a human ordering, not a biblical part of God’s creation. Full stop.

This text says, in essence, that a human being is not complete in isolation, alone. Human wholeness comes from partnership and community, not a uniformity, but a complementarity and a unity. This is before the fruit of the tree was tasted, before the fall; it reflects an ideal, of a relationship and world which once was, shall be, and for which we all now hunger.

Fast forward to Jesus’ day and the question of divorce. Even then, divorce was a hotly disputed topic in both Jewish and Roman circles. Here are some basics: The ancient world was patriarchal. Wives were regarded as the property of their husbands. Marriages were based not on love between two persons, but on transfer of property, status, and honor between two families. The stakes were different but divorce is always complicated.

According to the Law of Moses, only the husband could divorce his wife. This is the working assumption in our scripture today, but the two most prominent rabbinic scholars of that time offered differing views. The debate in today’s text would be akin, say, to debating the merits of an originalist interpretation of the US Constitution.

Jesus does not engage their debate. He takes what had turned into a legal convenience – typically for the man who sought a divorce – and pushes them to see that this law – indeed, *all* law – was and is intended to protect the vulnerable. When a woman was divorced she lost pretty much everything – status, reputation, economic security and everything – so how can they treat this as a convenience, Jesus asks, let alone a debating topic. The law is meant to protect the vulnerable and hurting and every time we use it for another purpose we are twisting it from the Creator’s plan and, indeed, violating it in spirit if not in letter. This is what Jesus meant by hardness of heart.

As Jesus calls upon them to include and care for even a child it becomes clear that he’s making a statement about the kind of community we will be. In fact, he’s inviting us to imagine communities centered in and on relationships that are founded on love and mutual dependence, fostered by respect and dignity, and pursued for the sake of the health of the community and the protection of the vulnerable. Women and children were the most vulnerable – in ancient times, as now.

Jesus does come down hard on divorce; I cannot deny that or find some clever way around it. But Jesus knows where we live: in a world where ideals and reality often clash. We are given the necessity of human laws to spell out what we are to do when living in the fullness of God’s creation is not yet attainable. And, most importantly, we are given God’s grace: To be broken is not something to be ashamed of; to be broken is to be human. And to be human is to be loved by God and drawn together into relationship with all the others that God loves.

The piece that is not explicit in this morning’s texts, and which I must bring in from other texts in order to preach this morning, is God’s forgiveness and grace which enable us to pick up and try again when we fall. And I want to make something very clear: falling short of God’s ideal is not a privilege reserved for those who divorce, or even those who marry. Falling short of God’s ideal is a condition with which every single one of us contend. I will also be the first one to declare that in many an instance divorce is the far healthier, life-giving, choice for personal wholeness.

Jesus does not address this, but I contend that the church needs to be clearer in finding ways to open our arms to, and be supportive of those who go through divorce. If we are true to God’s dream of all people living in whole relationship with one another, and offering the grace to do so, a special liturgy is in order, one that recognizes the dissolution of a relationship and holds forth the prospect of new beginnings and new life.

I want to say a word about vows and what it means to live a vowed life. Not just a life of marriage vows, but also of baptismal vows, and of other vows beyond the church which we may have made to God, to others, to ourselves. When we take a vow, be it “to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse,” or from our baptismal covenant, “to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self.” When we take a vow, that which we promise is not thereby fulfilled.

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A vow is the first step on a certain, chosen path. Loving, honoring, and cherishing are promises which every married person must seek to live into for all of her or his married life. "Proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ," "respecting the dignity of every human being;" these are promises which every baptized person has made and must seek to live into and out of every day.

Our ability to do so is flawed. We fulfill the promises we make some of the time in some ways. Again the tension: ideal and reality. Living a vowed life does not mean fulfilling all of the promises; it means being intentional and mindful of the vows we have made such that when we break them, we do not give up, abandon our hopes, or consider the vows to be of no value. Living a vowed life is a matter of perseverance, of taking another step on the path we have begun, trusting in the grace of God.

Which means that our gatherings here on Sundays are gatherings of the broken and loved, of those who are hurting and those who are healing, of those who are lost and those who are found, of those who know their own need and those who tend to the needs of others.

What God has joined together, let no one put asunder. To this, we say, Amen! Yet when that bond needs breaking, let us proclaim that God promises new life; and let us be the arms of support and hope, offering encouragement and love. Amen.