

## Sermon for October 7, 2018 "Divorce and a Child's Faith"

Mark 10:2-16

Jesus said, "What God has brought together let no one separate." (Mark 10:9) Then Jesus told his disciples, "Whoever divorces...and marries another commits adultery." (Mark 10:11-12) These words burn in our ears. Many of God's children have been divorced and then remarried. And those who haven't, know someone who has. Often times we know there was good reason for divorce. Perhaps the spouse was unfaithful or uncaring. Perhaps the spouse was even abusive. And we yearn for our divorced friends to find happiness in a new marriage in which they can experience a loving caring relationship. So we wrestle with these difficult words of Jesus.

But let me put these words in context. These sayings of Jesus were in response to a question posed by Pharisees to test Jesus. They were trying to draw Jesus into a current argument among the Pharisees and possibly trip him up or make him enemies with one side or the other. The debate involved an interpretation of God's Law. The Law of God allowed for a man to divorce his wife by signing a divorce certificate thus allowing both of them to remarry. But the Law said that he could do that only if she had done something "shameful." The rabbis argued over what "shameful" meant. Did it refer only to adultery, or to lesser things? Some rabbis went as far as to say that a man could divorce his wife because she had burned his toast or because another woman was more beautiful to him.

Jesus knew what was going on when the Pharisees asked him this question and refused to play their little game. Instead of joining the argument over legal definitions, Jesus chose to teach them about the nature and meaning of marriage. From the beginning it was God's plan that men and women join together and become one. (Mark 10:6-7) And once they were made one, it was God's intentions that they stay that way. (Mark 10:8) That's what God intended, but we human beings don't always follow through on God's intentions, so God's Law made provision for dissolving a marriage when necessary. (Mark 10:5)

Later, in private, the disciples asked Jesus about this. It's then that Jesus told them that if a man divorced his wife and married another he commits adultery. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another she commits adultery. By the way, the laws of Moses say nothing about a woman divorcing her husband, but Jesus does.

So, how should Christians respond to these words from our Lord? Christians have responded in many differing ways. Some churches do not recognize divorces at all. Some churches will recognize a divorce, but they will not remarry. Some blame the divorced person for not keeping their vows. Some churches refuse to allow divorced people to hold positions of leadership. Some will not allow divorced ministers to continue preaching. Some churches even say that a divorced person must return to their first spouse to be saved, while others argue that any divorces that take place before salvation are null and void. They are forgiven. Some theologians argue that the modern sociological situation is different and that Jesus' words do not apply to modern marriages.

What is the United Methodist Church's position on divorce? Let me read it to you. "...when a married couple is estranged beyond reconciliation, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, divorce is a regrettable alternative in the midst of brokenness. ... Divorce does not preclude a new marriage. We encourage an intentional commitment of the Church and society to minister compassionately to those in the process of divorce, as well as members of divorced and remarried families, in a community of faith where God's grace is shared by all." (The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016, para. 161D, p. 111-112)

Jesus appears, at least on the surface, to be disallowing divorce and remarriage, yet our church recognizes divorce. We see it as regrettable, it is always a last resort when marriage partners are estranged beyond reconciliation, but we recognize it, none the less, as well as the divorced person's right to remarry. Methodist churches for the most part are open to including divorced and remarried individuals as full and active members. We have tried and often succeeded in ministering to and with divorced and remarried people. Does that mean that we Methodists are simply disregarding Jesus' words of this matter? By no means. We are not disregarding anything Jesus said,

but rather we are trying to be true to everything Jesus said and did. I believe that the Methodist church's openness to divorced people is an attempt to be true to the larger message of the Gospel.

How is this so? As I pointed out before Jesus' words are not an attempt to lay down legislation, but rather an attempt to explain God's intention. It is God's intention that people who marry should marry only once and remain married "until death do us part." But the truth of the matter is we humans rarely follow God's intentions. Sometimes through acts of unfaithfulness, hateful abuse, or even neglect, a marriage dies. It is killed by the actions or inaction of one or both of the partners. The trust is betrayed. Sometimes through prayer and counseling the damage can be mended, but sometimes the partners won't be reconciled. God knows this about us so God made provision for the Israelites to divorce. It's not what God wants, but as Jesus said, God has made this provision because of the hardness of the human heart. (Mark 10:5) And that provision included the possibility of remarriage. After all the purpose of the certificate was to properly dissolve the first marriage, so that another marriage could take place if desired. (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)

What do we do with Jesus' words that appear to label remarriage as adultery? Once again, Jesus is not laying down laws but principles. As I noted before, one prominent rabbi stated that a man could divorce his wife because he thought another woman was more beautiful. Looking at another in that way is adultery. Jesus was responding to the loose morals of his age, and the attitude that a small matter, like burning the toast, was proper grounds for dissolving a union ordained by God. That I believe is the attitude to which Jesus is responding. If Jesus were saying that God's people could not divorce and remarry he would be contradicting God's law given to Moses. And Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law." (Matthew 5:17) So he must be explaining God's intention behind it.

But let's look deeper. Consider who it is that is saying this. It's Jesus who came into the world to offer forgiveness, healing, and new life to all. By the power of his blood Jesus offers to wipe away our past and give us a new beginning. That is what Jesus offers all people including those who have been divorced. Jesus offers to forgive, or wipe away and heal the past, and to be at work in us all to create a new beginning. Sometimes that new beginning may include a new spouse with whom they can experience anew what it means to love and be loved.

This is where Jesus' blessing of the children comes in. It's no accident that this cute story falls right on the heels of this difficult discussion about divorce. We Methodists are most familiar with this passage as the Biblical basis for infant baptism, but it is much more than that. It is an explanation of the proper relationship with God. Jesus says we must receive the kingdom as a child. A child is one who trusts and depends on the parent for guidance. A child looks to the parent as an example and tries to imitate the parent. Much of a child's play is simply copying the parents' actions; playing house.

That is how we should be. We should trust and depend upon God and try to imitate God's actions. Instead of spending our time making rules about divorce and remarriage, and then arguing over them like the Pharisees, we should trust and depend on God to show us how to reach out in love as Christ did. One day Jesus met a woman who had been married to five husbands. He didn't expound on the laws of Moses and apply them to her life like the Pharisees. Instead he reached out in love. He showed mercy and grace to her.

Yes, it is regrettable that people get divorced. Divorce is a painful thing. It is a result of our human frailty for we all fall short of God's intentions for us. But instead of condemning, we should be loving. Instead of inflicting pain and discomfort on people who are in a very painful situation already, we should be offering comfort and help. That is why I believe that the United Methodist Church's response to divorce and remarriage is faithful to the Gospel. It's a response that offers forgiveness and healing. It's a response that offers a new beginning through the power of Christ's love. Like children of God, let us depend upon God to show us how to live grace and forgiveness. Instead of trying to keep the divorced away from Jesus as the disciples tried to keep the children away, we should lead them to Jesus. And just as Jesus picked up and blessed the children, he will pick them up and bless them.