

Sunday October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024  
Communion-Pentecost 18

Mark 10:2-16  
“What Rules Your Relationships?”

A judge was interviewing a woman regarding her pending divorce, and asked, "What are the grounds for your divorce?" She replied, "About four acres and a nice little home in the middle of the property with a stream running by." "No," he said, "I mean what is the foundation of this case?" "It is made of concrete, brick and mortar," she responded. "I mean," he continued, "What are your relations like?"

"I have an aunt and uncle living here in town, and so do my husband's parents." He said, "Do you have a real grudge?" "No," she replied, "We have a two-car carport and have never really needed one." "Please," he tried again, "is there any infidelity in your marriage?" "Yes, both my son and daughter have stereo sets. We don't necessarily like the music, but the answer to your questions is yes."

"Ma'am, does your husband ever beat you up?" "Yes," she responded, "about twice a week he gets up earlier than I do." Finally, in frustration, the judge asked, "Lady, why do you want a divorce?" "Oh, I don't want a divorce," she replied. "I've never wanted a divorce. My husband does. He said he can't communicate with me!"

I fully understand that today's scripture lesson is a very sensitive one for many people. Especially for those whose marriages ended up coming to a divorce. Some of you know intimately the emotional pain, economic hardship and the difficult challenges of negotiating the end of a relationship that should have lasted a lifetime. At least that is goal we all see to strive for as we wed.

No one likes divorce, save divorce attorneys, and surprisingly as we read today's passage, no one seems to dislike it more than Jesus. Today's scripture lesson is one of a couple of occasions when Jesus talks about divorce with language that makes us all squirm. Those who have had to make the painful decision to divorce feel chastised by this passage and the rest of us feel out of compassion the need to tone down Jesus' harsh words.

First, we need to place this passage in its context. We know that this gospel lesson comes about because some Pharisees were trying to trick Jesus into saying something that would be against the Law of Moses. It was something they did quite often to Jesus. They thought that if they could get Jesus to publicly go against something in the Law of Moses then the people would turn from following him. It is, in other words, a serious attempt to discredit Jesus

What intrigues me most about this incident is that nowhere does the passage suggest why the Pharisees chose this question about divorce, but I like to think that maybe, just maybe, Jesus' demonstration of love and respect for women challenged the paternalistic and misogynist nature of the Middle Eastern culture during this time period. Time and time again Jesus showed considerable respect and care for marginalized people and especially women.

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It is common knowledge that in Jesus' day women were hardly equal citizens. They were, in the minds of the male dominated culture, a necessary evil, needed to procreate. Women had no legal rights and in the case of divorce, were at the very mercy of their husbands, who could divorce them for any cause, from burned toast to not providing a male heir. The scriptures, however, had restrictive reasons for a divorce.

1 Corinthians 7 tells us that if a person's spouse is an unbeliever and wants a divorce, the believer is to let the spouse go. In Ezra 10, it appears that the Israelites were told to divorce their pagan wives who would not repent of their idolatry. But nowhere in the scriptures, does it say divorce is okay for incompatibility, or because you no longer love the person, nor even for abuse. (That doesn't mean you can't call the police and have your spouse arrested or seek immediate help).

These are harsh words from the bible, maybe frightening to some who wonder about their own status. In Matthew 5, Jesus adds fuel to the fire by tying sexuality into the whole equation, in stating that marrying a divorced person is committing adultery. In fact, just looking at someone else lustfully, which means coveting them, means you've committed adultery.

On a side note, I couldn't help but mention a very funny episode of *The Simpsons* where Homer Simpson's next door neighbour Ned Flanders is having a major spiritual crisis. For those of you who know the show, you know that Ned is very particular in trying to be the best Christian he can be but is pesky in his moral questions to his pastor Rev. Lovejoy. Ned ends up calling his pastor in the middle of the night in a panic because he just lusted after his wife.

I can understand Ned's fear about the question of lust and adultery considering Jesus' words, but it makes us wonder why this heavy-handed approach by Jesus? You would think the Pharisee's question would be a simple academic issue, but Jesus is quite emotional about it. Why? Well, the issue is the heart, isn't it?

When a man lusts after a woman, he takes the mystery of her personhood and reduces her to a consumer item. When a man lusts after a woman he is unable to make a covenant with her person, and simply desires her beauty and glory. Now you know why it is so rare (although for the record it still occurs frequently) for a man to lust after an elderly woman, for her glamour is gone, yet her personhood is very much still present.

And please don't think women are immune to this lust. A woman may lust after a man, who possesses riches and power. Women chase after older men but only if they are rich and powerful. It's like that Hyundai commercial where the young woman bumps the car and sets off its alarm, bringing out the successful looking owner of the nice car. They introduce themselves and the young woman says what? "Nice car, Jake."

We get all this, but still the question remains; why is Jesus so heated about divorce? I am so grateful to Peter Hiatt and his book; "Dance Lessons for Zombies" for helping me see the connection.

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Peter tells the story about a man named Josh who for years had been consumed by his wife. He rescued her from a poor, abusive family. She was absolutely enamored with his wealth and good looks, but also very intimidated and reserved.

She had a very hard time opening up to Josh and over time her heart began to wander. For a long time, she kept up a façade, but it turns out that she was sneaking out at night and having sex with other men. She denounced her faith. She even became a prostitute. Josh would walk the streets to find her and buy her back from pimps. She gave herself to vile men but was frigid to Josh.

The counselor said she was caught in a cycle of shame. She was dying inside for intimacy but wouldn't surrender to her husband's advances. At one point, Josh gave her divorce papers. He'd hoped that would motivate her to turn back to him, but she didn't. Still Josh wouldn't look at another woman. He thought of her; dreamed of her; he followed her and tried to rescue her.

She'd pay pimps and customers to beat Josh. She even married a pimp, such that she was polluted just as Jesus talks about in our passage today. She was an adulterer, and an unbeliever who wanted a divorce. Things got so bad that one morning she even tried to kill Josh. If anyone ever had a reason for a divorce, his name was Josh. Well Joshua is his Hebrew name. His more familiar Aramaic name to us is, Jesus.

And we are his adulterous bride. We did kill him, but through the cross, Jesus romances his bride to Himself. And he takes his bride, you and I, and he washes us and shapes us into His image. The question is though do we want to be like him? Do we want to know him, commune with him, and bear his image? You see, all our questions about divorce are going in the wrong direction.

Because our questions about the legality and morality surrounding divorce are revealed for what they truly are by Jesus. We are really asking not about whether divorce is legal or moral but, "How can I get out of my covenant when it hurts? How can I get away from this cross? How can I look as little as possible like Jesus?" People say things like, "My marriage isn't working. I want a divorce."

Well, if your marriage is designed to shape you into the image of Jesus, then as Peter Hiatt suggests, your marriage is most working when your bride is ugly, cheats, lies, and spurns your love, and is now nailing you to a cross. And you just hang there saying, "Father, forgive her, for she doesn't know what she is doing."

And bride, your marriage is most working when your groom is naked, beaten, and emptied of his power, glory, riches and knowledge, covered with spit and shame. Yet you adore Him and see him as He is in weakness. Your marriage is most working when you still worship the bridegroom from prison cells, gutters, and alleys at the expense of your own life.

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Guys, are you willing to die for your bride-not her attributes, but her? The world says to us, “You only go around once, so get all the gusto you can get!” That is: riches, power, glory and pleasure. Well, it’s true, you only go around once. But for all eternity you will have all the riches, power, glory, and pleasure you’re capable of wanting. Yet there will be some things you can no longer get like mourning, crying and pain.

Peter Heitt suggests something that just knocked me over. He wrote, “Marriage is God’s sneaky way to get a person crucified.” Think about it. You marry a young bride for her beauty and glamour. God gets you to enter a covenant with no escape clause. “That’s crazy!” we might say. And before you know it, you’re hanging on a cross for the sake of love, looking a lot like Jesus.

And by the time you die, probably all the beauty and glamour will be gone. The groom’s strength, power, and vigor will be gone, and you will begin to love him, or her, in spirit and truth-body broken and bloodshed. You may have heard of Robertson McQuilkin who resigned as president of Columbia Bible College to care for his bride who had Alzheimer’s disease. His bride clearly had lost her old glamour, beauty and wit.

McQuilkin writes:

*Love is said to evaporate if the relationship is not mutual, if it’s not physical, if the person doesn’t communicate, or if one party doesn’t carry his or her share of the load...I count off what my beloved can no longer contribute, and then I contemplate how truly mysterious love is. What people find hard to understand is that loving Muriel isn’t hard...I think my life is happier than the lives of 95 percent of the people on planet earth.* (R. McQuilkin, “She’s My Precious” pp. 123-125)

The point is that Jesus hides in people like Muriel and he calls us deeper. He hides in our spouse and calls us to love deeper; to love beyond the glamour, past the flesh, past the knowledge and into the spirit.” So, as we think of Jesus’ attachment to us as his spouse, we remember how when we married or committed to Jesus, he was glamorous and beautiful, he made sense of our world, and he showed us his power.

But maybe now Jesus seems ugly, you can’t see his glory, and the world doesn’t make sense. He is so weak...it’s like he is... hanging on a cross. Will you divorce him? Will you fantasize about another lover because it feels like he can no longer give you what you need? Could it be that Jesus is giving you his heart-his greatest gift? Perhaps worship isn’t at all about taking but rather about giving, and the giving is the greatest taking: a communion where you drink God and he drinks you, a communion where two become one flesh just like in a marriage.

Larry Crabb says that most marriages are like “two ticks and no dog”-two bugs trying to suck the life out of each other. And then they die. But Jesus gives us His life. He gives us his blood. And we love each other because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19) It is no wonder then that Jesus refers to the people he met as an “adulterous generation”. They came after Jesus for signs and wonders. In other words, they lusted after his attributes but longed not for his person.

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Jesus said in Matthew 24:24, “False Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders”, but they will not love like Jesus. They won’t give you their broken body or their spilled blood. You know it is very disturbing to hear people say after they leave a worship service, “I wasn’t fed. The glory wasn’t there. The Spirit wasn’t there. The sermon was confusing. The songs were flat. There must be more. I want more.”

“Nobody got healed. Nobody received a miracle.” Could it be that instead of wanting to commune with our Lord we came lusting after his attributes? That he wanted to give us his heart and we longed for his riches, power and glory. In which case we probably didn’t discern the body and the blood and have drunk judgment upon ourselves. We probably break Christ’s heart when we come to his banqueting table.

We come receiving his broken body and shed blood, all the while demanding of him “signs and wonders”, “Healings and revivals”, “power and glory”; all the while belittling his heart. We must stop committing adultery against our Lord by refusing to receive him with gratitude. Perhaps the reason Jesus is so hard on divorce is because our earthly marriages reflect our relationship with him.

How in our marriages we see our spouses’ attributes and not our spouses. How we long for what we can get from our spouse instead of what our spouse offers us. How, the focus in our relationships is on everything, but on the thing that truly matters, namely the heart.

And just like with Jesus, when the way gets tough, when our beloved’s glory begins to fade, or they get scared up by life, or they lose those things that first drew our attention to them in the first place. And just like Jesus who was pressured for signs and wonders, our relationship is in trouble when we start demanding our beloved recapture their former glory by improving the outside appearance or glory.

We are becoming adulterous when what really matters to us is how our beloved appears to everyone else. “Do they dress properly? Do they maintain their weight? Do they exude grace and charm? Do they reflect positively on me? Is he or she eye candy?” Where’s the heart in your marriage? Where’s the heart in your relationship with Christ? What matters is that there is a covenant, a promise, where the two become one. We become one with our spouse and we become one with Christ.

Because in God’s math one plus one always equals one.