

Redeeming Relationships

A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr

First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – October 3, 2021 (World Com.)

Please Read:

Genesis 2:18-24

Mark 10:2-16

As we prepare to gather around the table for World Communion, remembering that we are part of the Holy Catholic Church, the global Body of Christ, it seems rather strange and even insensitive how the Lectionary links Jesus' teaching on divorce with the Genesis text on the creation of humanity for this Sunday. I've avoided preaching on divorce for decades, as it's too awkward for those of us who have been near the tragic and painful separation of loved ones. My brother completed a PhD in Clinical Psychology and counseled hundreds of couples over years. He told me, "I had no idea the depths of suffering in divorce ... until I went through my own."

Some scholars call this a "terror text," as it can be hurtful to read this in our cultural context. I know for a fact that some of you are married (happily and unhappily), some of you are divorced (some remarried) and some of you are not married for various reasons (including the fear of failure and divorce). I have friends who are married as husband and wife, and friends who are married as husband and husband, or wife and wife. Clearly the point of the gospel is not to judge relationships, or to reopen old wounds or feelings of guilt or failure. We know that in some cases divorce is the most loving outcome of a failed or broken relationship ... Some of my friends who are married husband and husband, or wife and wife have come out of more traditional marriages because they just couldn't be honest and true in heterosexual relationships. So, what exactly does this text have to say to us today?

Interestingly, Jesus moves the conversation about what is lawful according to the religious codes of the day, to what God intended from the beginning for all relationships. And that is, simply put, that *no one should be alone*. We all need a partner, a helper. And please note that this word Helper here is not diminutive or demeaning, but rather an honorific title; the same word is used to describe God as Israel's Helper!¹ Marriage is the ultimate relationship designed to redeem our loneliness and isolation, our alienation from God, and to "help" ourselves, and our neighbors.

Jesus moves the conversation from what is "morally right" to the first century woman's dilemma. The law said a simple letter of divorce can send a woman away, but Jesus says *not so fast*. Women are not property. She cannot be owned, nor sent away. Husband and wife are like one person. How can you send away a part of yourself? You see, Jesus refuses to defend normal family values, the limitations of the status quo. Instead, he shows his values to be protecting the vulnerable and standing in solidarity with the defenseless. People always rank higher than rules.

Whenever I am privileged to perform a marriage ceremony, I always say to the couple, your job is to love your partner so that she becomes more the woman that God created and calls her to be. And Your job is to love your partner so that he becomes more the man that God created and calls him to be." I think that's the purpose of marriage, to work out God's grace over a lifetime of giving and taking, of learning to share and give up and give in, to forgive and accept forgiveness, and to mature into a generative couple that reflects God's peace and love to the rest of the world.

¹ This noun (עֲזָרָה, 'ēzer, the same root that the name "Ezra" comes from) appears 21× in the Hebrew Bible. It is used for Israel's help from the LORD, unambiguously, e.g., in Ps 33:20[esv] Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. Ps 121:2[esv] My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. (cf. 124:8).

The "hardness of heart" Jesus warns about is not limited to married people, and it certainly isn't limited to those who have experienced broken heartedness from a failed marriage. Nevertheless, marriage is hard work, and the continuing softening of our hearts towards one another over time is one of God's greatest gifts. No wonder the early church fathers and mothers taught that marriage, like monasticism, is a training ground for the reign of God.

Perhaps that is why this passage is paired with the story about Jesus welcoming and blessing the little children over the objection of the disciples. The reign of God is open to those who receive it the way a little child receives it— playfully, whole-heartedly, as a sheer gift to those with no power, no rights, no demands, no status and no sense of their own achievement.

Whether we have married or not, whether we have succeeded in marriage or failed, or some of each, we are beloved children in the eyes of God. Jesus draws us near. I think more than anything else, we are in a position to know that we need grace and mercy, and hopefully we learn that others need the same from us. We are loved, welcomed and blessed by the God who made us, in the spectrum of male to female, so we can become objects of God's love and affection. What God has so joined together; no human being can ever separate.

Unfortunately, we humans have a tendency to alienate or stigmatize those who are different than we are. We are in a time in the history of our nation where scholars have concluded that our polarization is as bad as it was during the civil war.² Which, was, by the way, most uncivil.

I recently read a fascinating article by Allen Guelz, author of the biography, *Robert E. Lee: A Life*. Guelz described how after the Richmond, Virginia statue of the southern Civil War hero was brought down, hundreds cheered the event as a victory for racial justice. His reaction was more complicated. While Lee was on the wrong side of history, he is a good example of how complicated we all are and how, on the one hand, we can't wave away the moral delinquency of his support for the institution of slavery and fighting for its cause, but Lee was described even by his enemies as "a man of good character who experienced defeat. He was the image of anti-success, magnificent even when failing." The British novelist John Fowles laid down this rule as he attempted his biography of Adolph Hitler: "No true compassion without the will to judge, no true will to judge without compassion. Without the will to judge, any empathy is suspect and will be regarded that way. Without compassion, however – without a deep understanding of motives, times, places, losses, sorrows – the result will never rise above *sanctimonious caricature*."³

That line caught me up short. "Sanctimonious caricature." It's another way of describing "hard heartedness." We on the left and we on the right have both our fair share. Stephen Weinberg, author of *The First Three Minutes*, said, "With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil - that takes religion." What he means, sadly, is that *self-righteous anger* has led many good people to do evil things. History is full of examples of such.

² Referenced Sunday, October 3, 2021: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-u-s-is-suffering-from-toxic-polarization-thats-arguably-a-good-thing/>

³ Allen C. Guelzo, "How Do I Tell Robert E. Lee's Story?" (*New York Times*, September 28, 2021), A23.

And this is why we always need to check our hard hearts whenever we characterize “those people” of a different political conviction, or race, or sexual orientation, or nationality, or whatever. People are more complicated than our simplistic summaries. So, we are called to pursue relationship. When you take the time to get to know someone, and continue to pursue understanding their life, you realize that they too share the *imago dei*, the image of God, that they too have the potential for redemption, however evil or wrong their deeds may have been.

As followers of Jesus, we are to soften our hearts, and bear with one another. I remind couples at the altar that when Paul teaches “Love is patient,” he means “long-suffering.” The word in the Greek literally is “macro-thumei” which means, “Big-Suffering.” Anyone who is married will tell you, “Yes, marriage involves suffering ...” because that’s what love requires.

So, as we gather around the table today for world communion, we must first repent, change our thinking about who is worthy to come to this table. It is set for *all* who are in need of God’s grace and mercy, *all* who seek a better life and fairer world, but who have failed. This table is set for *all* who know they need God’s healing love to repair their marriage, or to graciously let it go, to welcome the “other,” the “stranger,” the vulnerable ones who we’d just as soon exclude. Here, at this table, we learn to love our neighbors whether across the back yard fence or ocean.

Indeed, relationships are hard, but we are created for relationships, and our identity is bound up in redeeming the relationships that we have received and committed to in life ... especially as we come around this table ...

Fred Craddock, one of America's great teachers of preaching, tells the story about another table experience. He was stuck in Winnipeg, Canada and in the midst of an early October snowstorm which paralyzed the city. Everything was shut down and his host could not even make it to Fred's hotel to pick him up for breakfast. So, for breakfast, Fred found himself at a crowded bus depot café about two blocks from his hotel. As he entered, somebody scooted over and let him get in a booth. A big man with a greasy apron came over to the table and asked him what he wanted. Not knowing what the café served, Fred asked to see a menu.

"What'd ya want with a menu?" the man asked. "We have soup." "Then I'll have soup," he said. Just what he wanted--soup for breakfast. The man brought the soup and Craddock says it was an unusual looking soup. It was grey, the color of a mouse. He did not know what was in it, but he took this spoon and tasted it. Awful! "I can't eat this," he said. So, he sat in that crowded café warming his hands around the bowl, railing against the world, stuck in Winnipeg.

Then, the door opened and someone yelled, "Close the door," and she did. A woman came in. She was middle-aged, had on a coat, but no covering for her head. Someone scooted over and let her in a booth. The big man with the greasy apron came over and the whole café heard this conversation: "What'd ya want?" "Bring me a glass of water," she said. The man brought the water, took out his tablet and repeated the question. "What'd ya want?" "Just the water." "Lady, you gotta order something." "Just the water." The man's voice started rising: "Lady, I've got paying customers here waiting for a place, now order!" "Just the water." "You order something or you get out!" "Can I stay and get warm?" "Order or get out."

So, she got up. But then something miraculous happened. The people at the table where she was seated got up, people around got up, the folks that let Fred sit at the table got up, Fred got up, and they all started moving towards the door with the woman.

"Ok," the big man with the greasy apron said, "She can stay." And everybody sat down. He even brought her a bowl of that soup. Fred asked the man sitting next to him, "Who is she?"

"I never saw her before," he said, "but if she ain't welcome, ain't nobody welcome."

Then Craddock said, all you could hear was the sound of people eating that soup. "Well, if they can eat it, I can eat it," he said. He picked up his spoon and started eating the soup. "It was good soup. I ate all of that soup. It was strange soup. I don't remember ever having it. As I left I remembered eating something that tasted like that before. That soup that day tasted like bread and wine. I wished that had happened in a church," he said.

"But sometimes it does. Maybe here, maybe this church, maybe today ..."

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.