

PASSAGES I LOVE TO HATE: “WHOEVER DIVORCES”

Second sermon in the series “Passages I Love to Hate”

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Matthew 5:31-32

31 *“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’* **32** *But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

Matthew 19:3-9

3 *Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?”* **4** *He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning “made them male and female,’* **5** *and said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’?* **6** *So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”* **7** *They said to him, “Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?”* **8** *He said to them, “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.* **9** *And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.”*

Prayer

O God, since it is your desire that all may be whole and healthy; since it is your passion for us to be open to your grace and love in Jesus Christ, come and open our minds and our hearts, and warm our hearts with the experience of your love in Christ our Lord. Amen.

Before there were controversies and debates about ordination and homosexuality in the church; before there were fights and schisms over the ordination of women in the church; there was one question that dominated our General Assemblies for several decades in the 40s and 50s (even as recently as the 60s!): Should the church allow people (back then it was men) who are divorced to be ordained as pastors, elders, or deacons.

Gary Demarest is a retired Presbyterian minister, a leader in our denomination who preached here a few years back when we had him come and talk about his hopes for the peace and unity of the church. He had been one of the co-chairs of a task force to propose a way out of our denominational strife. He had been chosen because he represented the more evangelical wing of the church.

We had a chance to talk a good bit, but there was one story that he told me that stuck with me. He came out of a very rigid religious background and attended one of the more conservative

seminaries. His first call was to be an associate at a church in Florida, and he recounted his first speech on the floor of presbytery. This was the early 1950s. It was against the ordination of any one who had been divorced. Scripture was clear on this, he said, both in the Old Testament and in the very words of Jesus himself. “It’s a sin!” he thundered, “and if we open this door, what will follow?” He was sure about this.

And then a few years later he went to his pastor with tears in his eyes and offered his resignation because he and his wife were getting a divorce. The senior pastor refused to accept it, as did the session unanimously. Gary told me, “It was the community of faith that showed me the Gospel of grace and forgiveness that had always been there.”

Father Zossima in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* was right: “Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing.” Jesus knew something about love in practice. It cost him his life, of course. We all fall short in putting love into practice. But at times Jesus sure had a strange way of talking about those failures.

“Whoever divorces his life, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you ‘Everyone who divorces his wife except on the grounds of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.’”

We don’t expect words like those from Jesus, do we? I for one, wish he had never said them. They sound harsh, insensitive, uncaring, judgmental, legalistic, wholly lacking in compassion and understanding — precisely everything Jesus was not, is not. Yet Matthew, Mark and Luke all repeat these words. Even the Apostle Paul, who in his letters seldom speak of the teachings of Jesus, remembers these. That this difficult saying was called to mind so frequently suggests at least two things:

First, that there was no doubt in the mind of the early church about the seriousness with which Jesus had addressed the subjects of marriage and divorce. And second, that questions of marriage and divorce and remarriage were no less widespread, no less difficult in the time the New Testament was being written than they are now. The words are sharp: They can cut and inflict pain. But I believe if we are to find blessing and healing in them, we will find them by going through, and not around, these verses.

We read these words, “whoever divorces his wife,” and already we realize we’re in another place. We’re in first century Palestine where men may divorce women—they didn’t need a court of anything — but wives may not divorce husbands; where, in fact, women have almost no legal rights. What they called divorce we would call abandonment or desertion. Can you begin to see why Jesus sounds so hard? Moreover, we might note that in Jesus’ time there was a great deal of discussion about divorce and remarriage: What were sufficient grounds for divorce? What was legal? Some rabbis, like Jesus, were strict: only in cases of immorality might a man dispose of his wife. Others were more lenient. A man could divorce for whatever reasons he saw fit, “even if she burnt his food,” according to the Hillel school, or “even if he found a better looking woman.” Women, you see, were legally considered a man’s possession.

We look again at these verses from the Sermon on the Mount, and we notice that at this particular moment, Jesus is speaking about a whole variety of “right relationships.” He told his disciples they had to have a “righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees and scribes...a righteousness, a goodness which cannot simply be measured by the requirement of the law. The law says do not kill, but I say to you, Jesus says, do not nurse anger, do not insult, do not put down each other. The law says do not commit adultery, but I say, everyone who looks lustfully — whoever regards another as simply an object of satisfying his or her own wants — has already committed adultery. The law says “whoever divorces his wife, but I say” — and what Jesus says takes marriage very seriously.

That, perhaps is the best context for understanding Jesus’ teaching on divorce: it is not so much that Jesus believes divorce to be bad but that he believes marriage to be good. That distinction can easily be confused. The Pharisees may have been confused by it when, later on in the Gospel of Matthew, they come to try to tie Jesus up in his own legalism about this matter. They ask—for that matter, we ask—“Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” They ask: Is it legal? Or, according to Tom Long, they are asking if God’s will includes the possibility of compromise, of cutting corners with heaven. Remember how divorce was simply considered abandonment? These religious leaders are really asking if God would be willing to wink at a little abandonment¹

Jesus doesn’t answer them. Or at least he doesn’t answer that question. He doesn’t answer by talking about what is legal, for Jesus could not bear legalism, but rather about what is good. He was interested in the things that make for life and that bore witness to the new creation, of which he was the inaugurator and the living embodiment. “Have you not read the creation story?” he asked. (Of course they had.)

From the beginning — from the beginning of all things when God created the heavens and the earth and blessed them and pronounced them all good, all very good, God also created us for each other. From the beginning God made us yearning creatures, creatures hungry for intimacy. God’s goodness was shown in giving us to each other.

We are gifts to each other. That’s the place to begin: Before we ever speak of marriage, we are gifts to each other. Whether we are male or female, gay or straight, married or single, we are God’s gifts to each other.

It takes time and a relationship of deep commitment to explore fully this gift we have received in another person, and indeed, what kind of gift we ourselves might be. We are inevitably surprised, often disappointed. Always astonished that there are riches we would not have dreamed, treasures that we had not wisdom to ask for. The gift is life, in one way or another — life. The gift of marriage, then is for life — and I’m not talking about a time duration or a legal bond, but the very purpose of marriage is for the enhancement and fulfillment of human life. Marriage is not required of anyone. People can use other gifts from God for the enhancement of life. Nor is it a hurdle we must leap, a law we must enforce, a curse we must bear.

Marriage is a gift, for the very sake of human life. A good gift from God, and it was so from the very beginning, Jesus says. Read your bibles. This was a revolutionary concept, even 2,000 years ago. No, you cannot just get rid of a wife because the law allows it. God calls you to a higher, new way of behaving. It is interesting to note that cultural historians believe that the habit that women have of wearing jewelry originated in cultures like the one which gave rise to this teaching, in which wives could easily be dismissed by their husbands, and were allowed to take with them no more than the possessions they could carry.² It was a strong, counter-cultural teaching of Jesus.

In the Presbyterian service for Christian marriage there is a beautiful, though somewhat lengthy statement about the many ways marriage is a gift from God. It says it well, but I don't believe I have ever read that in a wedding service without wondering if there wasn't some tongue-biting going on in the pews, and I wait for the day when someone stands up in the middle of that to protest: "It's not that simple. It's not that easy." And it isn't. It really isn't.

That's why near the end of the wedding service, there is a prayer that reads in part "Give them the courage, when they hurt each other....to seek your forgiveness and to forgive each other." When they hurt each other, not **if** they hurt each other, not if by chance some misunderstanding might happen to occur — no: **when** they hurt each other.

When they hurt each other as certainly, inevitably they will hurt each other. When they fail to receive the gift their spouse is and when they refuse to be the gift of God for this person and give forgiveness to one another.

And sometimes forgiveness is not enough. Or sometimes forgiveness is stretched until it snaps. The good gift of marriage is laid aside while all the old wedding gifts are divided and packed up. "You take this, and I'll take that." "Your Aunt Hazel gave us that platter, you ought to have it." And what about the children?

The pain of such moments is judgment enough. I don't know firsthand how being divorced feels. In fact, when I was talking to a close friend this week about what a busy week this was and how I was dealing with this topic in a sermon, I asked rhetorically, "How on earth can I preach about something I know nothing about?" And he said "It's never stopped you before."

But I have talked with an awful lot of friends, some of my closest friends, and have counseled with countless parishioners through the years who have been through divorce, and universally they speak in terms of agonizing pain, guilt, feelings of failure, inadequacy, remorse, self-doubt, loss of self-esteem. Often they compare divorce to death, which it is, of course. And it is interesting too, that for those who are Christian, how frequently they speak, after it happens, of their re-entry, their reinvestment of themselves into the fullness of life...how often they speak of it as "resurrection." And so it seems to me the divorced do not need so much to be reminded of their failure. They are aware of that better than anyone, and the last thing they need is a repeated reminder.

Bill Arnold until he retired recently as a professor of Pastoral Care at Union Seminary in Richmond, and a colleague of Gayle's. He is divorced, and eventually re-married. He speaks for many who are divorced when he says, in an article addressed to timid preachers like me, "Preach on marriage and divorce, preacher." Bill writes: "I want to hear some words that remind me of what marriage is intended to be and why we're still for it. Tell me something about God's intentions for marriage. Remind me that I am a finite creature who stands in the need of companionship. Remind me that marriage is intended to be one of the ways in which that companionship can be met. Help me see that marriage is more than 'need fulfillment,' that it is also intended to be a form of service, a form of stewardship. For goodness sakes, don't paint the picture too rosy, but give me reason to work on the relationship in spite of the disappointment. Let me know there really is purpose in marriage. Remind me of its purpose and place it in perspective."³

You see, if I heard the divorced correctly, (and those of you who have been divorced need to let me know if I am wrong) I hear the cry of people who do not want or need more reminders of their failure. They want, and desperately need, somebody to restore for them a belief that the promises of the gospel still remain true for them. That is, hope, joy, fulfillment, remain valid. They need to know that God is more interested in our tomorrows than our yesterdays.

So a couple gets married with a boatful of hopes and dreams, and then real life sets in. They struggle with schedules, jobs, children, temper, disappointment. Sometimes it is too much, and their marriage comes to an end. But let me tell you what never comes to an end: the welcoming, life-giving, forgiving love of God never comes to an end. The arms of mercy of open, and they will never close. Marriages may fail and come to an end, but God's promise does not fail and God's hope for us is unending. And it is the role of the church to help them experience the Gospel of grace and forgiveness that was always there and always will be there.

Some years ago I was counseling with a woman who had gone through a particularly difficult divorce, and after a while she was ready to re-enter life, to get back involved in church and other activities. She said "You know, Steve, it's too bad the church doesn't have a ritual for those who are divorced. We have wedding ceremonies, but nothing for those who have gone through divorce."

"What would you want in such a ceremony?" I asked her.

"Well, something that reminds me that though I failed at one thing, doesn't mean that I am a failure, that gathers a community around me that loves me even though I'm not perfect, and reminds me of God's love which leads me into the future with hope and new life."

"Oh, we have that," I told her.

"You do? Tell me more."

“It’s called communion. And everyone is welcome. The imperfect ones are most certainly welcome. Divorced, married, re-married, single, widowed, remorseful, sorrowful, guilty, those who keep promises and those who break them, those whose lives are in shambles and those who have managed to keep things pretty much together. Jesus invites us all, for the church’s final word on our failures is not sin, it is God’s forgiveness. It is hope. It is resurrection. It is the new creation that God is fashioning which summons us, calls us forward and leads us to each other, into tomorrow.

Because after all, God is more concerned with our tomorrows than our yesterdays.

Amen.

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¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*, Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1997. p. 217.

² Barbara Holland, “The Long Good-Bye,” *Smithsonian*, , March 1998, p. 93.

³ William Arnold, “Preach on Marriage and Divorce, Preacher,” *Journal for Preachers*. I cannot find the exact date.