



Divorce: Why the Church Has Read This Text to the Wrong People

TEXT
Mark 10:2–12

January 22, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This is not a sermon for people who are divorced — because the text is not a text for people who are divorced. The text offers a word to the whole church, whether you are married, divorced, single, widowed. This is a text for us all.

Some Pharisees wanted Jesus to weigh in on a question debated in his day. The question was this: What makes a woman objectionable enough that it is legal to divorce her? Please notice it was only women who were objectionable. Men divorced women; women did not divorce men.

A divorced woman would be shamed. She would no doubt struggle to support herself in a culture where the economic machines ran on the Y chromosome.

This is one more example of how in Jesus' day, men were viewed as more important than women. A lot has changed, but yesterday, the streets of most major cities in this country were filled with women who remind us that patriarchy remains an oppressive reality. There is no doubt that Jesus was mindful of this injustice in his day. I think in these words,

Jesus was pushing back against some of the patriarchy of his day. This is what I mean.

The Pharisees asked him what was lawful. Deuteronomy 24:1 reads, a man can write his wife a certificate of divorce when he “finds something objectionable about her.” They debated what “objectionable” meant.

Rabbis of the Shammai school said that the issue was sexual infidelity. If a woman was caught in adultery, a man could divorce her. Or if she was discovered to have been promiscuous prior to marriage, divorce was appropriate. This is the assumed circumstance with Mary and Joseph.

The rabbinic school of Hillel said if a wife “spoiled a dish,” the man could divorce. She ruins supper — send her packing. Rabbi Akiba said if the husband found another woman more beautiful, he could divorce.¹

If you deem women to be unimportant, these decisions get easier.

“Jesus,” they asked, “what is lawful?” Jesus was less concerned with what was lawful; he was concerned with what was good. Those aren't always the same. Jesus says, what God

has joined together, no husband can tear apart. Jesus says it is not God's intention that our relationships fall apart. God's desire is that we remain loving and faithful to one another, just as God is faithful to us.

I have no doubt that part of the meaning behind Jesus' words was to care for women, when they were abused, when they burnt dinner, when they weren't the most beautiful ones in the room.

Jesus told his own followers that women should not be cast aside so casually. There was more going on here than simply a transactional relationship. Holy relationships are not transactional; there is a spiritual joining, we become one flesh. So whenever marriages fall apart — and they do — everyone suffers. For Jesus, this is not a conversation about what is legal; it is a conversation about suffering.

Failure to understand this means this teaching of Jesus has caused great injury. People facing divorce often find themselves in the most painful season of their lives. And some have come to these words and felt judged, have felt shamed and worried that somehow they were not worthy of church. I

do not think that is the intent of this text.

Let me begin by saying something obvious. Marriage is beautiful. It is life-giving. For many it is holy.

Marriage is also hard. For some, it can be crushing, oppressive, demeaning.

I have heard that you can tell how long someone has been married by the way we relate to one another with a common cold.² In the first year of marriage they say: “Sugar, I’m worried about you. You have a bad sniffle. I’m going to call the doctor so that you can get a thorough checkup.”

By year two: “I don’t like that cough. I’ve called the doctor. The prescription will be delivered, sweetheart.”

By the fourth year: “Be sensible, darling. After you’ve fed the kids and cleaned up, you better get a little rest.”

By year six: “If you would gargle or something rather than barking like a seal, some of us might get a little sleep.”

After ten years: “For heaven sakes, stop sneezing. What are you trying to do, give me pneumonia?”

More seriously, marriage is hard.

I could talk about domestic violence and abuse and a host of other issues that all too often weave their way into marriage. But I will just say marriage is difficult. Even good marriages can be demanding. We pledge “for better or worse,” but sometimes it is worse than we imagined. The national statistics continue to show

the divorce rate of almost 50 percent.³ I assume that you are like me; if not you, within a generation there is divorce in your family.

I remember the time Carol looked at me and said, “Tom Are, there are some wonderful things about you.”

“Why, thank you, babe.”

She said, “I am working very hard to pay attention to them because if I don’t, the other things about you may overwhelm me.”

I remember meeting with a woman to plan a memorial service for her husband. They had been married over 60 years. It surprised me when she said, “Tom, I have no idea why I never left him. Tom, he was brutal. He was harsh with me. Our children were terrified of him. Our marriage was toxic. I have no idea why I stayed.”

I don’t know, but it would not surprise me if part of the reason she stayed is because Jesus said, “What God has joined together, let no one separate.” What do we do when leaving is sinful and staying is sinful?

Hear this carefully. If you hear nothing else today, hear this: I think Jesus speaks this word out of compassion, not judgment. He speaks this word because he wants us to avoid the *pain* of divorce.

Here is what I have learned. For some, divorce is the most faithful thing to do. For some, marriage is no longer a way of life that can be acceptable, and divorce is the right choice. Not only that, I have done my share of weddings for second

marriages, and I have known some second marriages — even in my own family — that can only be described as a gracious gift, as resurrection from the dead. I have known them not to be sinful but holy.

If I understand it, these words of Jesus are grounded in this reality: Even when divorce is the right choice, it will still be painful. Because in marriage we are not simply in a legal relationship; we are in a spiritual relationship. And when that is severed, it is painful. Everyone bleeds.

Jesus does not want us to suffer.

The compassion in this text has often been missed by the church.

It’s basketball season, and the Super Bowl is just a few weeks away. There are referees in these games. You never hear from them unless a rule is broken. As soon as a rule is broken, a flag is thrown, a whistle is blown. In other words, the referee’s job is to make sure the rules aren’t broken. But they don’t do anything to make sure the game is played well. They are not concerned with the good, just the legal.

The church is not a referee. The faith is not simply there to throw a flag on our lives, to blow a whistle in our hearts when we mess up. Our faith is to teach us to pay attention to what matters . . . to the good. And the good is to pay attention to our relationships.

If I understand the text, Jesus’ teaching on marriage is like parents who teach their children not to play in the street. Every parent tells the child: “Don’t play in the street. You can play in the

yard, but don't play in the street. If you play in the street, you will get hurt." So what do the kids do? They start walking to the street.

"What did I tell you? Don't go in the street." We teach this to our children not because we want to limit our children's freedom. We teach this to our children because we love them. The street is not a safe place to play, so we make a rule.

But if the child breaks the rule and is injured, there is no parent who would stand on the curb and cite the rule. "Now look at what you have done. I told you, don't play in the street." No. When a child suffers, the parent crawls down into the street to bring comfort.

That is the calling of the church. There is a time to speak of God's call to fidelity. Two become one flesh, and they are not casually separated. But when the heart has withered and the relationship atrophied and divorce has come, it is not the church's calling to stand on the curb and cite the rule.

In that moment, the only faithful thing to do is to crawl down into the street with the brokenhearted, with the grieving, with those whose lives are turned upside down and remind that the one who speaks the rule is the one who always speaks in love. The one who speaks the rule is the one who gives his whole self in love. His teaching is not to speak judgment on those who suffer, but to call our attention to the importance of paying attention to our primary relationships.

Back in the days when I was doing youth ministry, Tom and Janice would bring their kids to youth group every Sunday night. After youth group, they would return and pick them up. They were always together. Most of the kids were dropped off by one parent.

One day Tom and I were having breakfast, and I asked him about it. He said, "We go to dinner every Sunday night."

"Really, every Sunday?" I asked.

He said, "When you have kids, it is so easy for your life to be consumed by their lives, by your love for your children. We have friends who discovered when their children grew up and moved out, they didn't know each other anymore. We are just trying to pay attention to each other."

Marriages, friendships, church family ... none of these relationships can thrive unless we pay attention to them. This holy word calls us to pay attention to one another.

If you are married, if you are single, if you are divorced, if you are widowed, this is a word for you. Pay attention to the relationships in your life. They are worth the attention because when we fail to pay attention to them, they can fall apart; and when they do, we suffer.

And there is nothing in God's heart that wants your heart to break. So Jesus encourages us to pay attention.

¹Daniel Harrington, *Matthew Sacra Pagina* (1991), p. 275

²I heard this in a sermon from Bob Dunham when I served with him at Westminster Church in Charleston.

³A simple web search will provide a collection of statistics that reveal divorce rates. The number of divorces is decreasing in the United States, but so is the number of marriages. Therefore, the rate continues to hover just under 50 percent.

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.