

“A Divorced Pastor Speaks”

Psalm 119:1-8; Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37

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Good morning. My name is Brian, and I am divorced. Since sermons are conversations with one partner silent, your reactions may range from “So what?” to—as someone said to me this week—“I didn’t know pastors could be divorced.” Frankly, I would have preferred to speak on something else. Yet God kept nudging me: “You need to speak about this.” Since growth in grace as a Christian is related, in part, to transparency and integrity in public and private, here I stand.

There is also pastoral reason to speak on divorce. According to the (U.S.) Center for Disease Control, the percentage divorce rate for 2011, the most recent year statistics are available, is 56%. (1) When one considers others who are affected by divorce—in my case, my sons and step-sons, among many others—there are few of us unaffected.

We begin with today’s scripture. Christians take scripture seriously. Taking it seriously does not always mean taking it literally, but it does mean understanding the situation and context of scripture: particularly when Jesus is doing the talking. Here is what he said today:

(You have heard that) It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 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.”

We start to understand this teaching by knowing it is part of the “Sermon on the Mount:” an extended discourse that reflects the highest levels of ethical behavior, deeper than and exceeding religious law. Earlier Jesus warns us, “Don’t think I’ve come to abolish the law: I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill.” (2) So each teaching begins “You have heard that it was said of old...” followed by “But I say unto you,” indicating the rule and its deeper meaning.

(1) Provisional 2011 data show 6.8 marriages per 1,000 population and 3.6 divorces per 1,000 population: www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/divorce.htm

(2) Matthew 5:17

Therefore, the Gospel record of Jesus' teaching about divorce is clear: it is contrary to God's highest yearning for those who marry. In the three Gospels where it is mentioned (3) it is tantamount to adultery, a crime punishable by death. Matthew's version, which allows for divorce "on the ground of unchastity," is consistent with the teaching of the Jewish school of Shammai at the time of Jesus. Someone said to me: "Your divorce is okay since your partner was unfaithful" and I laughed and replied "Good thing we're reading Matthew since Mark and Luke do not allow even this." More importantly, there was no chance of fidelity once my former wife claimed a buried part of her sexual orientation.

Jesus speaks so strongly for three reasons. First, marriage fidelity is God's intention and fulfills God's highest hope for us. Jesus revisits this later in Matthew's Gospel, a text often read at marriage ceremonies:

Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' 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'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. (4)

Second, in Jesus' day, some allowed divorce for frivolous reasons. Deuteronomy 24:1 allows for divorce of a woman due to "some indecency." Biblical scholar William Barclay (5) says the stricter Jewish School of Shammai defined "some indecency" only as adultery. "*Let a wife be as mischievous as the wife of Ahab,*" they said, "*she cannot be divorced except for adultery.*" Since the wife of Ahab worshipped foreign gods, anathema to devout Jews, this was no small concession!

But the Jewish School of Hillel was more liberal, defining "some indecency" as spoiling a man's dinner, going about with an uncovered head, talking with men in the streets, or being troublesome or quarrelsome. Barclay observes that marriage was so insecure in Jesus' day that some girls were unwilling to marry, despite the importance of marriage in first-century Judaism.

(3) Matthew 5:31-32; Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18

(4) Matthew 19:4-5

(5) Barclay, William, The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1, Westminster Press, 1975, pp. 150-152

That begs the third reason Jesus spoke strongly, which careful listeners have already recognized: it was a matter of justice. Divorce was a man's world. A woman could be divorced without her consent, but not a man. In patriarchal culture, a woman went from her father's estate to her husband's estate like a piece of property. Indeed, apart from a man she had no rights to property or inheritance. Divorce was not only unequal but unjust, and put a woman at risk of being destitute.

With all this, it is easy to see why the Church has consistently supported marriage by discouraging divorce. When I was a child, if you were a pastor and got divorced, your pastoral career was over. When I entered ordained ministry in the late 1970's, it was still an open question; and you may or may not have received an appointment depending on the circumstances.

Two assumptions drove these expectations. The first is that pastors have an obligation to lead by example. Example matters. The Church felt divorced clergy were the wrong example. The second assumption was the clergy could not be effective if divorced. This assumption was for both personal and institutional reasons. Personally, for most people, divorce is a form of failure. Even when divorce is a better alternative than a loveless or abusive marriage, there is still a sense of failure in having failed to fulfill the vow at the altar "til death do us part." Speaking personally, I never saw myself as a divorced person and the sense of failure at my lowest point was nearly overwhelming. Professionally, not only are the clergy at risk of being distracted from their professional duties by their personal trials, but also there is a risk of splitting the church between those who support the pastor and those who support the pastor's spouse.

Yet this church now has its fourth consecutive divorced pastor. So what changed?

One thing that changed was the realization that prohibition to divorce could be license to abuse. Anyone here who survived an abusive marriage does not need me to say more. The church came to

realize that the end of an abusive marriage was preferred to the continued brutalization of a child of God.

Another thing that changed was the movement of women into the paid work force (women have always worked: the question is whether they were paid) and a partial equalization of power between men and women as a result of relative economic independence. Fewer women stayed in relationships out of economic necessity. One of the reasons my former wife and I have a reasonable level of civility in our relationship today is because our economic contribution to the marriage was roughly equal. Had I, being betrayed, then had to lose more than I did in an economic settlement, the outcome would likely have been less pleasant. The justice issue to which Jesus spoke, while still somewhat in play, is less so today.

These changes in the broader society inevitably affected the clergy whose denominations allowed them to marry. The Church formed a growing consensus that, while divorce was not God's highest yearning for humankind, neither were many other sins for which the clergy were not punished. Concerning divorce in general, our United Methodist Church, in its Social Principles, says this:

“When a married couple is estranged beyond reconciliation, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, divorce is a regrettable alternative in the midst of brokenness. We grieve over the devastating emotional, spiritual, and economic consequences of divorce for all involved, understanding that women and especially children are disproportionately impacted by such burdens....we urge respectful negotiations in deciding the custody of minor children...the welfare of each child is the most important consideration.

“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.” (6)

So why this message? What's the “so what?” that makes a difference?

6. The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2012, The Social Principles, Paragraph 161C, pages 109-110.

First, it is important for thinking Christians to understand Jesus' ideal in the context of its time; and to hold on to that ideal while at the same time recognizing the brokenness of humanity.

Second, it is important for feeling Christians to realize that the church is to be a supportive and caring community in the midst of divorce as well as other experiences of brokenness; and for people in the midst of divorce to realize that they are not alone and not the only people ever to have felt as they do.

Third, it is important for acting Christians to live out of a conviction of grace, "God's love freely given," that new beginnings are possible. With those new beginnings come forgiveness for self and others and a chance to start anew.

Fourth, it is important for all Christians, but most notably United Methodist Christians at this time in our history, to realize that our perspective on important life issues can and does change. There was a time in our history when we thought it was okay to own people. We don't think like that anymore. There was a time in our history when we thought it was okay to insist that one stay married, even if suffering physical and emotional abuse or the prospect of continuing infidelity. We don't think like that anymore. We are now at a time in our history when these same Social Principles, that allow what was once forbidden, declare that people with different sexual orientations are "less than" and that their lives are "incompatible with Christian teaching." All around us other sections of the Church are changing, and we need not be afraid to consider changing, too.

In all these discernments, may we continue to converse with one another with respect for each other as children of God and to grow in grace, forgiveness and love; as Christ loved and died for us all.