

First Presbyterian Church  
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Jesus' teaching today isn't easy. Indeed, it will make most of us uncomfortable. It's about an issue that has impacted nearly every American family in some way - divorce. That's why it needs to be spoken of. His teaching may seem harsh, and it may be difficult to for many of us to hear. However, I can assure you that there is grace to be found here, but it only comes once we've sat with our discomfort and opened our hearts to God. So listen friends, for Jesus' teaching, and seek that deeper understanding with me.

Mark 10: 2-16

2 Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' <sup>3</sup>He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' <sup>4</sup>They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' <sup>5</sup>But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. <sup>6</sup>But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." <sup>7</sup>"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, <sup>8</sup>and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. <sup>9</sup>Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

<sup>10</sup> Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. <sup>11</sup>He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; <sup>12</sup>and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

### **Jesus Blesses Little Children**

<sup>13</sup> People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. <sup>14</sup>But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. <sup>15</sup>Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' <sup>16</sup>And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

One of the things that is great about being a pastor is the marriage preparation counseling we get to do with couples preparing for marriage. Most of the time, these are young couples just starting a new life together. They are often excited to be coming together. They're optimistic about the journey. They are thrilled to be joining together in the mysterious union that Jesus describes, quoting Genesis, where two become one.

One of the things I get to do when counseling with these young couples is remind them that marriage can be great. It can be an amazing vessel for God's blessing to pour into. It can be a relationship that grows and flourishes over time, growing more robust and durable with the years. Marriage can become the sort of relationship where two lives come into perfect rhythm with each other. Where mutual encouragement allows each to take risks and grow. Where mutual respect and reverence for the other allows each to feel loved and supported. All while each partner remains an individual unto themselves, whole, unique, and wonderful in their own right.

And I get to see that this is possible when I spend time with some of you. I see couples who have walked a lifetime with each other and have tasted a small bit of this beautiful and mysterious union where two have truly become one. Where marriage has become as natural as breathing, and where their marriage becomes a witness to the harmony that is possible between two souls.

Because that's the goal we're striving for, isn't it? One thing that all the couples we counsel for marriage preparation have in common is that they are wanting that sort of beautiful, harmonious, union. Nobody starts out a marriage expecting it to fail. We all want to be the sort Jesus describes where two leave their parents and become one.

That's why the pain of divorce is so difficult. That's why the ubiquity of divorce is so problematic. The statistics on divorce are staggering. The most common is that about 50% of all marriages end in divorce. I imagine there is not a single family here in attendance today, not one, that hasn't had to deal with the pain of divorce somewhere in their family tree. If not in the immediate family, then in close relatives.


And there's no such thing as a painless divorce either. Even in so-called amicable divorces, there still comes the loss of something – a death if you will – of a hoped-for life together that is lost. Frankly, most divorces are devastating for all those involved. A divorce is a death of a dream. The ending of the most intimate of relationships. It especially devastates the couple and their children. But it also acts as stone cast into a pond that creates ripples flowing outward that affect all those in the couple's lives: their parents, other relatives, co-workers, circle of friends, and so on.

No one is ever really ready for it either. You can think that you've steeled yourself for what's to come, but each new day might bring a new challenge you never anticipated. I know, I'm speaking from experience, my own parents divorced when I was a young adult. Even though I had already left the home and had married myself, the divorce still caused all sorts of unanticipated pain for our family.

So when Jesus teaches about divorce, we all sit up and pay attention. Because this is an issue that is close to our hearts, and cuts close to very real pain. Scholars think that the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus with this question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" They think they were trying to get him in trouble with King Herod who had had John the Baptist beheaded for criticizing Herod for marrying his divorced sister-in-law. So Jesus turns the question back on them, "What did Moses command you?" And they cite the code in Torah that allowed, "a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her."

This is where things get interesting, because note that the Torah allowed a man to dismiss his wife. His wife, who was treated as property of the male; his wife, who had no legal recourse to divorce on her own; his wife who would have been cast out and destitute because she would have depended on her husband for her well-being. Jesus, said, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you." And clearly it would have taken a hard heart in those ancient times for a man to cast aside his wife, knowing that he was consigning her to a life of hardship without his support.

And so, Jesus uses this moment to remind them of the purpose and meaning of marriage. That it is a relationship that God created for beautiful, reciprocal love, and as a sign of the order of God's plan in creating humanity. He



asks them to remember that marriage sheltered and ordered by God for the sake of humanity, for the good of all, and it is reflective of divine love.

Jesus is reminding them of their calling as married people. But not only is the calling for married people, he's also reminding all of us of our calling as single people, children, teens, young adults, widowed people, and yes even divorced people. That we have a higher calling as Christ followers: that we are to love God and love our neighbor selflessly; that we are called to serve others, because as we learned in Mark 9 just a few weeks ago, "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (Mk. 9: 35) His response to the Pharisees is challenging them to look higher, strive for more, to dare to attempt to live a life worthy of the calling we have in God to love more perfectly, serve more perfectly, live more perfectly.

But we don't get there do we? And we're reminded of that all the more when Jesus takes his disciples aside, and delivers this even more difficult teaching, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; <sup>12</sup>and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.' (Mk. 10: 11-12)

And before we get on our high horse and start to judge the divorced ones in our midst for this hard teaching. Or, even worse, before we start to feel the pall of guilt or shame come over us for those of us unfortunate enough to have been divorced ourselves. I want us all to remember that none of us are off the hook here. Elsewhere, in Matthew 5, Jesus teaches, "<sup>28</sup>But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup>If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup>And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell." (Mt. 5: 28-30) And remember from Mark 9, last week, Jesus said, if your hand, or your eye, or your foot, causes you to stumble cut it off... for it is better to enter the kingdom of God limbless, then to be thrown into hell.

It seems like none of us have any just cause to feel superior to any other then, does it? If we were to take Jesus' teaching literally, we'd all be eyeless, handless, and legless individuals stumbling about. As theologians have written,

the ground is level at the foot of the cross. There's no one us that is superior to the other. We have all fallen short of the glory of God.

And to be fair, we have made allowances for each other. No one should be expected to stay in a marriage where there has been infidelity, and there is no hope of reconciliation. No one should be expected to stay in a marriage where there has been physical or emotional abuse. No one should be expected to suffer in a lifeless, joyless, or dead marriage.


I think that Jesus knew that as well. He knew that he was asking of us what will sometimes be impossible. He knew that we can work and strive and strain for the goal that we know is good, and still fall short. He knew that we are only human after all.

It makes me think of the young ruler who came to Jesus and asked "what must I do to inherit eternal life." And Jesus asks if he has kept all the commandments his whole life, and the young man replies, yes. Jesus then tells him to go and "sell all you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. <sup>24</sup>Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup>Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

The disciples, exasperated by Jesus' teaching exclaim, "Then who can be saved?" To which Jesus replies, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God." (Luke 18: 18-26).

Maybe you're like me this morning, and asking that same question, "Then who can be saved?" When you realize just how short we come of the goal set for us in Jesus. No one loves perfectly. No one serves perfectly. No one has a perfect walk. We're all going to face our eye of the needle moment and feel ourselves having to walk away because the teaching is too difficult.

That's why, again, I believe Jesus knew all this. That's why I believe that the end of today's passage is so critical, where Jesus allows the children to come to him and he teaches, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is



to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. <sup>15</sup>Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

The teaching here is this: we are helpless before God. It's not our worthiness that gets us there. It's not our efforts that get us across the goal. It's God's love that does that. It's the pure gift of God's grace – unmerited favor and forgiveness that does that. As Jesus said, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.” Only when we come to the deal with nothing, like children, fully dependent on the one who can save us, do we stand a hope. And the good news is that when we do that, we are welcomed with open arms.