A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

“*What God Has Joined Together*”

Mark 10:2-16

October 7, 2018

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus affirms the holiness of marriage and the seriousness of divorce. In any congregation of human people who live human lives such as we do with all of our hopes and hurts, this reading has the power of being both reassuring and painful, as Jesus resolutely affirms the high and holy intention and hope for marriage, even while acknowledging that divorce is a reality. We can do the same: genuinely stand in awe at the holy intent of marriage, encourage and strengthen marriages whenever we can, and share compassionate understanding for those for whom divorce is an inescapable part of their lives. What we can’t do, if we’re going to follow Jesus in this, is treat marriage lightly as if it can be discarded at a whim.

They first came to me as two young, starry-eyed teenagers. “We’re in love,” they said. “We want to marry and be together forever.” Through premarital counseling sessions, the stars didn’t quite fall from their eyes, but their eyes were opened bit by bit to the reality of the commitment they were about to make, and even more to the person to whom they each were about to commit. It got a little rough, so rough that I sent them to the big city to a marriage therapist to help them work through some of the deep challenges they had. When they finished their sessions with her, I was hopeful. A hard-won maturity was beginning to replace a starry-eyed romanticism.

The wedding was beautiful. She floated down the aisle in a white dress. He waited for her in a black tuxedo. They held hands, said vows, and committed to one another until death do us part. They rode away happy as newlyweds should do.

It was the kind of story repeated over and over again on Saturdays throughout the year. In the presence of God and congregations of the faithful, preachers pronounce you husband and wife. What God has joined together, let no one separate.

What God has joined together. That’s what we believe happens in a marriage. Marriage, we believe, is far more than a contract of convenience, and far more weighty than flights of romance. Somewhere under the sweet frosting of the wedding industry is the cake of reality: marriage is for real, marriage is for life, marriage is holy. We say the words, but God does the work of making one out of two. That doesn’t mean it’s an easy road.

“God hates divorce,” the prophet says. Well, ya, we all do. No one I’ve ever met thinks divorce is great, but no one I know is unaware that it’s a painful reality in many families.

What Jesus answers about marriage and divorce can be guidance to us all, but in Mark 10, pretty obviously one marriage and divorce in particular is on the minds of the Pharisees who test him with the question. They had been going after Jesus for a long time, looking for a way to rid themselves of this pesky prophet. He had big crowds following him, and that was a problem. But now he was back on their turf, and that was an opportunity.

Since his baptism by John at the Jordan, Jesus had been building crowds in and around Galilee, up north, in rural areas, going back and forth across the Sea of Galilee, preaching, teaching, healing. He probably would have been okay if he’d just stayed up north around Capernaum and the Decapolis, but Jesus was never one to seek safe refuge for long. And so chapter 10 opens, “He left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them.”

What looks like at first a throwaway geographic note is actually what makes this story. The Jordan River is where John the Baptist had his ministry, where John attracted his own crowds of followers, and where John had courageously and publicly criticized King Herod and Queen Herodias for divorcing their spouses, in her case the king’s own brother, in order to marry one another. That public, courageous resistance earned John arrest, prison, and then his head on a platter. Some preachers are braver than others. John was. Would Jesus be too? We’ve already seen in Mark’s gospel that the Pharisees were in cahoots with the Herodians. The Jewish legal fundamentalists and the Roman libertarians made strange bedfellows, but they shared a political marriage of convenience to rid themselves of Jesus, who annoyed and threatened them both.

Now Jesus comes to Judea to the Jordan to the exact place, stands on the same rock on the same bank of the same river where his friend, his cousin, his forerunner John the Baptist stood not long ago. Seizing the symbolic significance of that moment, they pose THE question that hung in the air. Jesus, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? The question was not only intended to put Jesus on the horns of an age-old, well-known theological debate about what constituted grounds for divorce, but also in the middle of the palace intrigue of the day. We all know what John said about those two up there in the palace, and we all know what happened to him. Now, what do you say?

The tension in the drama is clear: The question was purposefully timed to put Jesus in an impossible situation. It was more than messianic legitimacy in the eyes of the crowds at stake. This time it was his very life.

On the surface, the question was easy. In fact, the Jews had legal divorce in their law. They know the law, and Jesus does too, everyone does. The law permits a man to divorce his wife. Deuteronomy 24 gives detailed instruction for how a man should present his wife with divorce papers should he choose to, though there was considerable debate about what grounds men could use to divorce their wives, whether it was only if she committed adultery or whether any irritation could be grounds, even if she burned his toast. There was no considerable debate about whether women had the same option. They didn’t.

Jesus casually upends their fixation on the details. Divorce is permissible under the law because of your hard hearts. But it’s not supposed to be that way. That’s not the way God had in mind.

While they looked to Deuteronomy, Jesus points back to the beginning of Genesis to our creation. Look, you know the story, Jesus says: “God created male and female. 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. It’s the unity made by marriage that Jesus emphasizes. The religious leaders lasered in on the legalities of divorce. Jesus is overcome by the tragedy of divorce because he knows the heart of God. What God has joined together, let no one separate.

While not denying that divorce is a reality, Jesus points past the law to a unity born of marriage to be of so high a spiritual order that if you divorce and remarry it’s adultery against your spouse. This was as shocking then as it is now, but let’s remember this is the same Jesus who says that anyone who looks at anyone else lustfully has already committed adultery. I’m pretty sure, if I know people, that no one is throwing any stones at anyone else on this one. Jesus sets so high a bar for righteousness and purity we all drop our stones and ought to be on our knees praying repentance every day.

I actually think here at this moment on the banks of the Jordan River, Jesus has particularly in mind what Herod and Herodias did in very cavalierly leaving their spouses in order to marry one another. In the shadow of Herod and Herodias’ palace, Jesus affirms the word of John the Baptist. If you treat marriage so casually that you divorce one person so you can marry someone else, that’s wrong on so many levels. John died for saying that. Jesus will soon share John’s fate too.

I don’t think Jesus here is condemning all people who’ve been divorced. I’d find that hard to square with what we know of Jesus’ interaction with people whose life journey had taken them off the straightest and narrowest kind of path: the woman at the well was offered living water, the woman caught in adultery was picked up off her feet, tax collectors and sinners of all kinds were not just welcomed but embraced by him. Still are. We live in this reality framed by Jesus word: marriage is high and holy, but sometimes married people divorce and their dream ends.

According to an old Jewish legend, a rabbi was once asked by a Roman governess about what God did to while away the hours since finishing the creation. The rabbi answered, “The Holy One has been sitting in heaven arranging marriages.” The Roman governess was not impressed. “Indeed! I also could do as much myself. I have thousands of slaves and could marry them off in couples in a single hour. It is easy enough.” “I hope that you will find it so,” said the Rabbi. “In heaven it is thought as difficult as dividing of the Red Sea.”

He took his leave while she assembled one thousand men-servants and as many maid-servants, marked them off in pairs, and ordered them to marry. On the day following this wholesale wedding, the poor victims came to their mistress in a woeful plight. One had a broken leg, another a black eye, a third a swollen nose. All were suffering with different ailments, but all cried out with one voice, “Lady, unmarry us again!” Then the matron called for the rabbi, admitted she had underrated the delicacy and difficulty of match-making, and wisely resolved to leave heaven to do its own work in its own way. (“Marriages Are Made in Heaven,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*. Vol. 2, No. 2 (Jan., 1980), 172-177.

The Victorian British author George Eliot heard about this rabbi who said that God was in heaven arranging marriages. Eliot reflected: “The levity of the saying lies in the ear of him who hears it; for by marriage, the speaker meant all the wondrous combinations of the universe, whose issue makes our good and evil.”

Eliot presses the saying on marriage with keen insight. Marriage, at its best, and by its intention, manifests God’s desire for unity, for shared love, for the whole universe. No wonder the New Testament uses the image of a wedding to try to capture the sacred beauty of the relationship with Christ and his bride, the church, joined in unity for the good of the world, bringing forth children of faith from one generation to the next.

It’s a beautiful picture, this Edenic vision, this heavenly-birthed holy matrimony. Of course, the Old Testament law to which the Pharisees appealed wasn’t born out of thin air either. Sometimes tender hearts go cold and become hardened to one another. Then what? People sometimes live a long time together unhappily. Sometimes they come together in deeper, more meaningful redemptive ways than they ever thought possible. Sometimes, they get divorced.

About two years after a happy wedding ceremony, I received a letter in the mail.

“Pastor, my marriage is over. It’s been six months since we divorced and I’m just now beginning to come out of the fog of it all. Today I’m sitting on the front porch swing. It’s raining and I’m alone and I’m considering what has become of my life. With what he was doing to me, I had to leave him and as painful as that is, I have a peace that it was the right decision and that I am in a better place because of it. I never imagined that I would be a divorced person and it’s still hard to look in the mirror and not feel some shame because of it. I was always taught that divorce is wrong, but life doesn’t always go the way you want it to. I’m just now beginning to get to where I can pray again. I hope I can come back to church someday, I just don’t know. I’m sorry I had to get divorced. But everyone has their limits.”

It was a sad letter. I was sad for her and for him. She was sad. Everyone was grieving. What God had joined together had been torn asunder. It was not a clean cut; it never is. The jagged edges of the cleaver tear the heart apart. They say divorce is a sin, and we’re supposed to say that and mean it as if it’s the last word on the subject. And I can say with conviction, that divorce, like the kind John the Baptist called out, is sin. But most of the time, when I’ve had a front row seat to the trauma, divorce seems less a transgression and more a triage. It’s less like arson, and more like calling the fire department because the house is burning down all around me and if I don’t get out I’ll die. I’ve gotten right in there with them and tried to help beat back the flames, but sometimes the destruction is already too much. I’ve known few divorces for which I thought I should speak a word of judgment; I’ve known a lot that I thought could only be met with tears at the grief of it all.

Her brief journey in marriage was a long way from the idyllic vision Jesus paints about marriage, drawing on the creation story of a man and a woman coming together to be one flesh, embodying God’s desire for unity and love. Jesus saw marriage as something to be cherished, to be prized, honored as holy. His vision went much farther than the religious leaders who tested him with a legal question about the law about which Herod and Herodias made a mockery. He had a vision of a holy unity in marriage that should never be split, and in many ways can never be split. We say the words, but God does the work. Jesus doesn’t say anyone lives happily ever after, but he does say they live on forever together, as one.

We don’t have to give up on or apologize for that vision of marriage to have compassion and understanding for those who have suffered divorce. Goodness, Jesus himself had compassion on all kinds of people. They are the ones he died for, those sinners, those human people putting their lives back together after the fall, learning to live again, beautiful in God’s sight, all those people discovering again the possibility of true Love, all those sinners like you and me.

May God abundantly bless our marriages with joy, grace, and divine love. May God be very present in the hard times, bringing strength, renewal, and hope for the long journey of repairing what is broken. May God bring redemptive new life for all of those for whom a chasm has been cleaved between life as they dreamed it and life as it is. Christ is in that space. Christ is always in those wounds.

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