

**The Changing Face of America's Families (II):
Divorce and Remarriage**

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Mark 10:1-12

"I hope you didn't take offense when my husband walked out during your sermon," a woman told the pastor one Sunday.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I did find it rather disconcerting," he replied.

"Oh, it's not you," the woman responded, "he's been sleepwalking since he was a child."

Well. The good part about preaching on issues like "the changing face of America's families" is that there's little chance people are going to sleep. Judging by the e-mails and calls I've received this week, "family matters" strikes a chord with many in our congregation. And why wouldn't it? Our congregation is a microcosm of society at large, and we reflect its changing face. Last week we looked at marriage, and in two weeks, we'll examine gay marriage. After Easter, we'll explore the concept of the church community as a kind of family model. That ought to keep us wide awake for a month of Sundays!

Today's sermon begins with an acknowledgement of a terrifying statistic: 50% of marriages entered into today will end in divorce. No one is happy with this reality, and what it represents: emotional suffering to both spouses and children; all too often, financial difficulties for the spouse who retains primary care of the children (usually the mother). Approximately 10% of Americans are divorced, and currently, 28% of children under 18 live in single parent families, including ones in which one parent has died (statistics cited in *USA Today*, February 26, 2004).

Throughout its history, the Church has had one primary message about divorce: it's a sin. Don't do it. When I considered this week's focus, I knew immediately the text I would have to read, and as a divorced person myself, inwardly cringed. Unlike the condition of homosexuality, divorce *is* a subject of which Jesus spoke. And spoke of with little ambiguity. In the morning text, Jesus declares divorce to be no more than a legal loophole based on human weakness. He goes further to add that remarriage following divorce constitutes adultery. For many years, this text was cited as the last word on these matters, and was wielded like a hammer on people who were contemplating either.

As we read these words, I ask us to remember their historical context: a patriarchal society in which men ruled and women obeyed. In marriage, the wife was regarded as the property of her husband. She had few legal rights, and in ancient Israel at least, that included the ability to end her marriage. Rather than simply hearing their literal meaning, let us seek in these human words God's word which in Jesus Christ we know to be a word of grace and hope. A reading from the gospel according to Mark in the 10th chapter at the first verse [Mark 10:1-12]

How are you going to talk your way out of this? a church member sincerely asked. I overlooked his apparent view that the sermon is merely a product of the preacher's adroit interpretive skills, because I think he legitimately wondered how contemporary Christians could hear this text as good news.

Good question! But the fact is, the Church has "talked its way out of" the seemingly harsh demands of Jesus' words. We do recognize divorce as a moral choice in some situations. We joyfully marry people who have been divorced, and see their new marriage as a sign of God's intent to make all things new. In the last century, divorce pretty much disqualified persons from the pastoral ministry, and I remember wondering when I became one of that number, whether my congregation would ask me to resign.

Observant folk have pointed out the correlation between the church's change of heart and society's change of practice, and noted how they occurred about the same time. But I suggest that there is more going on here than merely a lowering of the standard in order to accommodate the prevailing moral decline. A careful reading of this passage shows that Jesus' intent is not to arouse guilt, but to instruct the religious leaders who used the question to try and trap him.

Note how Jesus redirects the Pharisees question "Is it lawful to divorce?" into a discussion about marriage. In Jesus' day, the right to divorce was not questioned, but the grounds for doing so were hotly debated. No doubt the religious leaders were trying to get Jesus to define those grounds so specifically that one group or another would be offended and Jesus would be discredited. But Jesus refuses to play their little game. Instead, he transforms the argument about the legality of divorce into the divine intent for marriage, a profound and lifelong union between two persons. He goes beyond the confines of the law to describe marriage as God's good gift. Rather than reading this as a sweeping legal prohibition to divorce and remarriage under any circumstance, we should first hear this as an affirmation of God's original intent that "the two shall become one flesh."

And friends, you and I know that “one flesh” cannot be divided except through great wounding. God created human beings in love and for love, and not for broken hearts. God did not design the world for divorce in the same way God did not design the world for warfare. And yet, God understood from the beginning that a creation crafted for freedom would indeed take up arms against each other. God knew that the people would break each other’s hearts and wound each other’s spirits. God had to develop “plan B.”

Plan B: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son...not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might have life in him. [John 3:16,17]* God’s love for humanity is so faithful, so persistent, that God makes provision for our faithlessness, our fickleness. God did not resign us to the sorry consequences of our choices and behaviors. Instead, God sent the Son into the world to heal and mend and reconcile it. By God’s grace, the wounds inflicted through divorce can be healed, and broken family life restored. Sometimes that healing results in a restored relationship, and a new beginning for a married couple. But other times, the new beginning will become possible only through the division of the “one flesh” and their re-formation as two separate individuals.

God can bring good purpose to bad situations, wherein lies our hope in marriage, in divorce, in life. The Church has been called to witness both to God’s perfect intent for people, as well as God’s grace and power to redeem in the face of imperfection. At times we accent one of those two equal truths over the other, and fail to live up to our calling. Practically I think that means holding the very highest view of marriage—as a lifelong covenantal relationship of love between two people and God. The Church should support educational efforts to teach this understanding at every age and stage. We need to offer the very best pre-marital counseling, and to promote professional marital counseling for couples—and families--experiencing difficulty. On the other hand, the gospel we proclaim is a gospel of grace. At times, the Church has done little for divorced persons beyond reinforcing feelings of failure most are likely already to have had. We need to say explicitly that sometimes divorce is the better choice, and one through which the individuals may grow and thrive. Even for children, living through a good divorce can be better than surviving a bad marriage. My family was broken when my former husband and I divorced; but by God’s grace we and our son have healed, each of us in our own way, at different paces. I don’t consider us a “broken home” any more, and I’m grateful for congregations along the way who supported and helped us experience God’s redemptive power and forgiving love.

Perhaps above all, friends, I think the Church is called to a posture of humility that avoids judgmentalism. All of us sin, and fall short of God's glorious intent for us. I have heard many divorced persons over the years say that they felt like second-class citizens in the Church; as if their marital status disqualified them from full participation. Until recently, for example, fellowship groups in this congregation used that category for membership: designating some for "couples" and others for "singles." Such divisions in a faith community committed to God's vision of a restored human family are counterproductive, and I'm glad we're moving beyond them.

Underlying it all, I believe, is the unshakeable foundation of God's perfect love which strengthens our own, imperfect though it be. Along with Jesus' teachings, the Church ought to sing the Song of Solomon, showing with our deeds that *many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it...and that finally, nothing, nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord [Romans 8:39]*. In divorce we learn how to let go of love—sometimes because that choice is forced upon us, sometimes because of our own choosing. May the Church be the community which demonstrates the Love that will never let us go.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

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