

Oregon City United Methodist Church
18955 S. South End Road
Oregon City, OR 97045

Rev. Michael Benischek
503-522-9807
September 20, 2015

Series: Sermon on the Mount, Chapt 5
Sermon: Divorce

Matthew 5:27-32

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

For Whom God has Joined Together...

There are those scriptures, when a pastor is called to preach upon, that makes the pastor excited and exuberant at the possibility of preaching from such a text. Those stories or images that jump from the pages of your Bible and they flow through your veins and leave you with a warm, joyful tingly feeling inside. At the thought of preaching from such a text, I just want to say, “Thank you, Jesus, Thank you.” And then there are those scriptures, there are those scriptures that I don’t want to touch. Their content scares me and I don’t want to accept what it says. The scripture from this morning is one of those texts that I don’t like to see on the bulletin form Sunday. Scriptures that I don’t feel comfortable preaching from. At the first reading, it sounds like the pastor is going to offend a good portion of their hearers when the pastor tells them that Jesus says “Divorce is wrong”. And it comes from the mouth of Jesus, of all places. It would be easier to refute if it came from another place, but coming from the Son of God kind of gives it that aura that this is not exactly debatable, or “this is just an idea, don’t quote me on this.” These kind of passages make me want to say, “Why, Jesus, why?”

Marriage and divorce is a touchy subject in which I might not be the best authority to preach from. I have never gone through the pain of divorce and yet I am called to preach on Jesus’ displeasure, not even displeasure, Jesus’ rejection of the possibilities of divorce. Many of you might be wondering on my worthiness to preach from such a Gospel, and you would be right in questioning...but I am reminded at times like this, that if you don’t trust me preaching on marriage and divorce because I’ve never been there, I wouldn’t blame you. But please don’t go to a worship service, or even a funeral where a pastor might be talking about heaven, because I’d wager that that pastor hasn’t been there either.

“Friends, we are gathered together in the sight of God to witness and bless the joining of two people in Christian Marriage”. And so begins the marriage ceremony in our tradition. A covenant of marriage. A holy institution. Other traditions consider it more than a covenant, but call it a sacrament, where God’s presence could be found and thrives. Marriage is a beautiful event of two hearts coming together for eternity. It’s a life changing event. Life styles are probably modified. Big questions have to be answered. Who is going to handle the checkbook? Who will do laundry? Dishes? Mow the lawn, cook, clean, shop for food, scoop the walk, etc. These are not small questions. And a couple has to figure out what works best for them. I like to do laundry. She likes to do

the checkbook. Not only do we compromise on tasks, but also on behaviors. Steph doesn't mind being a little late or tardy for certain events, while I go crazy if I'm not at least 20 minutes early for anything. I don't see what's wrong with keeping the toilet seat up. She is scared of taking midnight splashes. Did you know that there is proper toilet paper etiquette? It's true! I like it from the front, she likes it to hang from the back. Our compromise is whoever puts it on the roller gets to decide. Seriously, Christian marriage is a sacred institution where two people who love each other commit their lives to God and to each other in the presence of a Christian community. Whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder.

Let no one put asunder. Our scripture seems very clear about how Jesus felt about marriage and divorce. We hear these words out of the Sermon on the Mount. This morning, I'll use a little bit of the same story out of Mark. The Pharisees came to Jesus in Mark: "Jesus, is it OK for a man to divorce his wife?" And Jesus dodges the question. "What did Moses say?" And they answered "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." But Jesus responded differently than Moses, didn't he? Jesus then said it was wrong for a person to get divorced, period. No questions asked. Divorce was a hot topic right then. Jerusalem, at that moment, was ruled by King Herod. Herod was married to a woman, but then divorced her to marry his brother's wife, Herodias. Herodias was already in the family, she was the daughter of another one of King Herod's brothers. She married two of her uncles. Her own daughter would later marry another grand-uncle within the family. Try and keep this family straight! John the Baptist criticized King Herod for his divorce, and the King had John put in prison and later executed. So when the Pharisees asked Jesus this question, it wasn't just an opinion poll, but they were hoping Jesus would say something that might get him into trouble and face the same fate as John the Baptist.

Friends, let's take a look at divorce in our culture today. We hear that over 50% of marriages now end in divorce. While I think that is extremely high and grounds for concern, I believe that divorce is necessary in certain situations. There is a lot of pain and suffering that takes place within a divorce, but it provides an outlet where there is much more pain and suffering if the couple stays married. I fully agree that couples should try and patch up their differences and heal the wounds, but sometimes it cannot happen. I just cannot happen and the least harmful solution is separation. Do I think that some couples revert to divorce to quickly? Yes. Do I think that couples shouldn't have gotten together in the first place? Yes. Marriage was created so that two loving people could live happily ever after in a sacred bond of mutuality, trust and love. Friends, if there is not love in the relationship, if there is not mutuality, if there is not trust, then where is the marriage? Where is the sacredness? I believe that divorce could be the best path for people in a no-win situation. Marriage, for marriage's sake, is worthless. Sadly, domestic violence is by far the most common form of violent crime in America today. I am always shocked when I hear the numbers of victims. According to the odds, we have hundreds of cases in Oregon City. According to the odds, we have it in our church. Families where there is constant fear. If you know of anyone in this situation, tell them to get help. Don't tell them to work out the marriage on their own because it's such a long shot to change the situation without outside help. Marriage is for people who love each other and lift one another up. It was not created as an institution that traps people in a living hell where personal safety is a concern. Please tell them, when the moment is right, and when the moment is safe, to seek out someone that they can trust who can help. Where is the sanctity of marriage in the bruises, the broken arms, and the abuse?

What was Jesus really saying? While I believe that Jesus was concerned about the sanctity of marriage, I think he had a different intent as to why he said what he said. Remember what life was like in the olden days and the role of women in society? Not just back then, but you still see some of it today. Women, as you know, were considered property. Whose rights and privileges were constituted from the male in the household. Women were submissive, purchased, used and abused, and dependant. Dependant. Think about that for a moment. The only place that an independent woman could go was to be a slave, beggar, or prostitute. There was no

alternative. You were with a man on the bottom rung of society, where survival was nearly impossible. It's not fair, it's not right. There are still too many glass ceilings, but it's not like what it used to be. To be dependant on a man in that day and age offered a small amount of hope to a woman, because the law commanded that the men take care of the woman. They had to provide. They had responsibilities to sustain and share. It wasn't a good place to be, but it was a place. Let's look at our scripture again. The Pharisees ask if it is permissible for a man to divorce his wife. Moses said it was OK. For practically any reason. He could end the obligation to his wife and send her away. But I ask you, send her where? To the bottom rung of the social order where awaited begging, pleading prostitution, and death. Send her away into a world that didn't want her. Jesus cared about those women who were discarded and thrown quite literally to the wolves. Jesus cared about the people who were on the outskirts of the social structure, who are excluded, oppressed, used, and tossed out. Jesus cared about the sanctity of marriage and didn't want to see an abuse of power when marriage didn't work out as it hoped and leaves one stranded powerless, hopeless, and ending in darkness. Look at children in the scriptures - also powerless and dependant. He took them into his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them. Jesus takes those who are left stranded, who are sent away by us. The concern was not on the absoluteness of marriage or the rigged refusal of divorce, but the concern is whether or not there are people on the outskirts who cannot participate in the world. Who are sent away, and where do they go?

I challenge us to look at ourselves and identify those whom we send away. People we don't accept. Whom do we send away. This topic is a little personal for me. It's a wonder I'm in the ministry at all. I vowed I didn't want to belong to a church like that.

If your life is going great and you and your spouse have the nice yard, 2.3 kids and a dog - OK, I want us to be your church. Our doors are open.

If your life is in a hard spot, you've gone through divorce or you're going through one now - OK, I want us to be your church. Our doors are open.

If your family life is different than others - OK, I want us to be your church. Our doors are open.

I've done hundreds of weddings and this is what I've discovered: EVERY family has some form of dysfunction or weirdness. I've yet to meet a normal family. Our families are dysfunctional because there are people in them!

If you want to hear a sermon about how divorce is always wrong - you can find a church like that, but not here. If you want to hear a message about unconditional love and walking with folks as they go through the good times and the bad - come on by. If you are married, look for the sanctity of God. What makes it sacred? If you are divorced or going through separation, we lift you up, knowing that you are going through terrible pain and anguish. We are praying for you. And if you feel you are on the margins of life, where one small step could take you over the edge into frightening darkness, let it be known that Jesus cares about you, he takes you into his arms, puts his hands on you and blesses you and loves you. Ya know, on second thought, thinking about all we have talked about, the next time I read this scripture, I'm going to say "Thank you, Jesus, Thank you."