

Sermon 3 October 2021
“Divorce and a Child’s Faith”
Mark 10:2-16

Gracious God, be with us today in this place, in the Scriptures and in our words.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts praise your Holy name. Amen.

Jesus said, “What God has brought together let no one separate.”(Mark 10:9)

Then Jesus told his disciples, “Whoever divorces ... and marries another commits adultery.”(Mark 10:11-12)

These words burn in our ears.

Many of God’s children have been divorced and then remarried.

And those who haven't know someone who has.

Often times we know there was good reason for divorce.

Perhaps the spouse was unfaithful or uncaring.

Perhaps the spouse was even abusive.

And we want our divorced friends to find happiness in a new marriage in which they can experience a loving caring relationship.

So we wrestle with these difficult words of Jesus.

But let me put these words in context. These sayings of Jesus were in response to a question posed by Pharisees to test Jesus.

They were trying to draw Jesus into a current argument among the Pharisees and possibly trip him up.

The debate involved an interpretation of God’s Law.

The Law of God allowed for a man to divorce his wife by signing a divorce certificate thus allowing both of them to remarry.

But the Law said that he could do that only if she had done something “shameful.”

The rabbis argued over what “shameful” meant.

Did it refer only to adultery, or to lesser things?

Some rabbis went as far as to say that a man could divorce his wife because she had burned his toast or because another woman was more beautiful to him.

Jesus knew what was going on when the Pharisees asked him this question and he refused to play their little game.

Instead of joining the argument over

legal definitions, Jesus chose to teach them about the nature and meaning of marriage.

From the beginning it was God's plan that men and women join together and become one.
(Mark 10:6-7)

And once they were made one it was God's intentions that they stay that way. (Mark 10:8)

That's what God intended, but people don't always follow through on God's intentions, so God's Law made provision for dissolving a marriage when necessary.
(Mark 10:5)

Later, in private, the disciples asked Jesus about this.

It's then that Jesus told them that if a man divorced his wife and married another he commits adultery.

And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another she commits adultery.

By the way, the laws of Moses say nothing about a woman divorcing her husband but Jesus does.

So, how should Christians respond to these words from our Lord?

Christians have responded in many differing ways.

Some churches do not recognize

divorces at all.

Some churches will recognize a divorce but they will not remarry.

Some blame the divorced person for not keeping their vows.

Some churches refuse to allow divorced people to hold positions of leadership.

Some will not allow divorced ministers to continue preaching.

Some churches even say that a divorced person must return to their first spouse to be saved, while others argue that any divorces that take place before salvation are null and void.

They are forgiven.

Some theologians argue that the modern sociological situation is different and that Jesus' words do not apply to modern marriages.

What is the United Church's position on divorce?

Let me summarize it for you.

Basically, when a married couple can no longer live together and they are beyond reconciliation, divorce is a regrettable alternative in the midst of brokenness.

Divorce does not preclude a new marriage.

Also, the church encourages 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.

Jesus appears, at least on the surface, to be disallowing divorce and remarriage, yet our church recognizes divorce.

We see it as regrettable, it is always a last resort when marriage partners are estranged beyond reconciliation, but we recognize it none the less as well as the divorced person's right to remarry.

United churches for the most part are open to including divorced and remarried individuals as full and active members.

We have tried and often succeeded in ministering to and with divorced and remarried people.

Does that mean that we United church people are simply disregarding Jesus' words on this matter?

Not at all.

We are not disregarding anything Jesus said, but rather we are trying to be true to everything

Jesus said and did.

I believe that the United church's openness to divorced people is an attempt to be true to the larger message of the Gospel.

How is this so?

As I pointed out before Jesus' words are not an attempt to lay down legislation but rather an attempt to explain God's intention.

It is God's intention that people who marry should marry only once and remain married "until death do us part."

But the truth of the matter is we humans sometimes have trouble follow God's intentions.

Sometimes through acts of unfaithfulness, hateful abuse, or even neglect a marriage dies.

It is killed by the actions or inaction of one or both of the partners.

The trust is betrayed.

Sometimes through prayer and counselling the damage can be mended, but sometimes the partners won't be reconciled.

God knows this about us so God made provision for the Israelites to divorce.

It's not what God wants but as Jesus said God has made this provision because of the hardness of the human heart. (Mark 10:5)

And that provision included the possibility of remarriage.

After all, the purpose of the certificate was to properly dissolve the first marriage so that another marriage could take place if desired. (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)

What do we do with Jesus' words that appear to label remarriage as adultery?

Once again, Jesus is not laying down laws but principles.

As I noted before, one prominent rabbi stated that a man could divorce his wife because he thought another woman was more beautiful.

Looking at another in that way is adultery.

Jesus was responding to the loose morals of his age, and the attitude that a small matter, like burning the toast, was proper grounds for dissolving a union ordained by God.

That I believe is the attitude to which Jesus is responding.

If Jesus were saying that God's people could not divorce and remarry he would be contradicting God's law given to Moses.

And Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law." (Matthew 5:17)

So he must be explaining God's

intention behind it.

But let's look deeper.

Consider who it is that is saying this. It's Jesus who came into the world to offer forgiveness, healing, and new life to all.

Jesus offers to wipe away our past and give us a new beginning.

That is what Jesus offers all people including those who have been divorced.

Jesus offers to forgive, or wipe away and heal the past, and to be at work in us all to create a new beginning.

Sometimes that new beginning may include a new spouse with whom one can experience anew what it means to love and be loved.

This is where Jesus' blessing of the children comes in.

It's no accident that this cute story falls right on the heels of this discussion about divorce.

We United Church people are most familiar with this passage as the Biblical basis for infant baptism, but it is much more than that.

It is an explanation of the proper relationship with God.

Jesus says we must receive the kingdom as a child.

A child is one who trusts and depends
on the parent for guidance.

A child looks to the parent as an
example and tries to imitate the
parent.

Much of a child's play is simply
copying the parents' actions;
playing house.

That is how we should be.

We should trust and depend upon
God and try to imitate God's
actions.

Instead of spending our time making
rules about divorce and
remarriage, and then arguing
over them like the Pharisees, we
should trust and depend on God
to show us how to reach out in
love as Christ did.

One day Jesus met a woman who had
been married to five husbands.

He didn't expound on the laws of
Moses and apply them to her
life like the Pharisees.

Instead he reached out in love.

He showed mercy and grace to her.

Yes, it is regrettable that people get
divorced.

Divorce is a painful thing.

It is a result of our human frailty for
we all fall short of God's
intentions for us.

But instead of condemning, let us be
loving.

Instead of inflicting pain and
discomfort on people who are in
a very painful situation already,
let's offer comfort and help.

That is why I believe that the United
Church's response to divorce
and remarriage is faithful to the
Gospel.

It's a response that offers forgiveness
and healing.

It's a response that offers a new
beginning through the power of
Christ's resurrection.

Like children of God, let us depend
upon God to show us how to
live grace and forgiveness.

Instead of trying to keep the divorced
away from Jesus as the disciples
tried to keep the children away,
let us lead them to Jesus.

And just as Jesus picked up and
blessed the children, he will
pick them up and bless them
too.

Thanks be to God. Amen.