



The Reality of Divorce and the Promise of Wholeness

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

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Genesis 2:18-24

Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

'This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.'

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Mark 10:2-9

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." "For this reason 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. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

“From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female... and the two shall become one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one put asunder!” And in case this is not clear, in the next verses Jesus explains to his disciples, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery!”

We call it the Gospel, the Good News, but I have to tell you that there are times when the news does not sound very good. There are times when I think, ‘you know, instead of preaching on the texts, maybe I’ll just tell everybody a good story. Yeah, I think that’s what I’ll do....’

I don’t need any special insight to know that most everybody here has had an intimate experience with divorce, if not in your own marriage, then within your family or circle of close friends. With divorce comes pain, shame, disappointment – in ourselves, in others – even when divorce is the healthiest option in the given circumstances. Do we now have Jesus condemning as adulterers those who divorce and remarry, heaping sin and guilt upon an already overburdened situation?

While running from these texts may be my first inclination, I find them provocative. Genesis and Mark offer contrasting perspectives of our life: Genesis presents an ideal partnership, a life of union; Jesus addresses the reality of broken relationships. All of us – married, divorced, single, widowed, partnered – and I will add in this context: lesbian, gay, straight, bisexual, trans-gendered – live with the tension between ideals and reality.

The passage from Genesis is the second of the two stories of the creation of humanity. It speaks of how the first person God made from the dust was alone and needed a partner. None of the birds or animals were suitable, for the man had dominion over them. So God caused a sleep to come over him, and took a rib and from it created a woman. And they became one flesh.

It is important to undo some of the inaccurate readings of this passage which have historically been employed to give man dominion over woman. Two words: “Adam,” the first man. *Adam, adama*, is a play on the word for earth. *Adam* is a word which means humanity; it does not have sex. The first person becomes male only in contrast to the creation of female. As there is no darkness without light, neither is there male without female. Second, the word “helper,” which the text uses to describe the second person. Helper does not mean subservient; in other instances, the word helper is used to describe God! The subordination of women is a human ordering, not a biblical part of God’s creation.

What is presented in this text is that a human being is not complete in isolation, alone. God saw, God sees, that our wholeness comes from being in relationship with another. Human wholeness requires partnership and community, not a uniformity, but a complementarity and a unity. What is described is before the fruit of the tree was tasted, before the fall; it is a reflection of an ideal, of a relationship and world which once was and for which we all now hunger. When two persons come together in a partnership, that is a gift of God’s creation, reflecting the wholeness for which we are created.

Leaving Genesis for the moment and turning to Mark, we find Jesus being tested by the Pharisees. What is the law regarding divorce was then, as now, a topic for considerable debate with any number of positions regarding if, when, and how it is appropriate. Moses himself had provided the law. As is often the case when being tested, Jesus ignores the question and drives to the heart of the matter. “Moses wrote the law about divorce because of your hardness of heart,” says he, and then quotes from Genesis of how God created us such that two shall become one.

The Pharisees are asking, ‘what is permissible? What can we get away with? What are the legal loopholes?’ Jesus’ retort is designed to show their petty, legalistic scheming for what it is. Instead of answering their question, Jesus points to creation, to the wholeness of life. Jesus does come down hard on divorce; I cannot deny that. But I know where I live: in a world where ideals and reality often clash.

We are presented this morning with a picture of the human condition and the difficult predicament of living with the promise of wholeness and the reality of brokenness at one and the same time. On the one hand, I see unblemished creation, an ideal. I see the wholeness in partnership for which we long, the wholeness in community with all sisters and brothers. On the other hand, reality. The fact that it does not always work the way we hoped, the way we promised – to ourselves, to another, to God. I see the necessity of human laws to spell out what we are to do when living in the fullness of God’s creation is not yet attainable.

We live our lives between, within, both of these truths.

What I do not see in this morning’s texts, and which I must introduce in order to preach these words this morning, is God’s forgiveness and promise which enable us to pick up and try again when we fall. And I want to make something very clear: falling short of God’s ideal is not a privilege reserved for those who divorce, or even those who marry. Falling short of God’s ideal is a condition with which every single one of us contend. I will also

be the first one to declare that in many an instance divorce is the far healthier, life-giving, choice for personal wholeness.

Jesus simply does not address this, but I would argue that the church needs to be clearer in finding ways to keep our arms open to and supportive of those who go through divorce. A special liturgy is in order, to recognize the dissolution of a relationship and to hold forth the prospect of new beginnings. Even though this deserves a sermon in its own right, while I am on it with the church, and our liturgies, let me also say that for the church to deny people access to the sacrament of marriage on the basis of their sexual orientation or the sexuality of their chosen partner, is to preclude and to bar some among us from that promise of wholeness, that ideal, which is given by God in creation, not to some, but to all. All of the sacraments are for all of God's children.

So, it is in the space, the chasm, between ideals, dreams and wholeness – brokenness, disappointment, and reality, that you and I live our lives. And it is only by the grace of God and our capacity to hope that we are able to try again, to risk loving, to open our hands and hearts to another in vulnerability.

I want to talk for a moment about vows. As is made clear in Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees, there are two ways of looking at the same thing. It is possible to seek in all things for the easy way out, for the path of least resistance. One can ask, what can I get away with? How little do I need to do and still get by? In my mind, that leads to cynicism and a half-hearted approach to life. In the context of marriage today, I see pre-nuptial financial agreements as the fruit of such a perspective.

In contrast, I lift up what I will call living a vowed life. Not just a life of living marriage vows, but also of baptismal vows, and of other vows outside the church which we may have made to God, to others, to ourselves. When we take a vow, be it "to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse," or from our baptismal covenant, "to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self." When we take a vow, that which we promise is not thereby fulfilled. A vow is the first step on a certain, chosen path. Loving, honoring, and cherishing are promises which every married person must seek to live into for all of her or his married life. "Proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ," "respecting the dignity of every human being;" these are promises which every baptized person has made and must seek to live into and out of every day.

Our ability to do so is flawed. We fulfill the promises we make some of the time in some ways. Again the tension: ideal and reality. Living a vowed life does not mean fulfilling all of the promises; it means being intentional and mindful of the vows we have made such that when we break them, we do not give up, abandon our hopes, or consider the vows to be of no value. Living a vowed life is a matter of perseverance, of taking another step down the path we have begun, trusting in the grace of God. It is rather like being called – as in, to be called by God. (Borrowing from Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, p.18), "I use the term "call" not in the sense of a datable experience, but as a sense that one's life ... is deeply referred to the purposes of God, which gives freedom and distance and perspective in relation to all other concerns. Such a call, or vow, is not an event, but an ongoing dynamic of a growing and powerful claim." The life we are called to live is a vowed life.

What God has joined together, let no one put asunder. To this, we say, Amen! Yet when that bond needs breaking, let us proclaim that God promises new life; and let us be the arms of support and hope, offering encouragement and love.