

AS LONG AS WE BOTH SHALL LIVE: MAKING MARRIAGE LAST

Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Mark 10:2-16

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 8, 2000.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Pharisees questioned Jesus about divorce. Is divorce lawful according to God's Law? At the time, two rabbinical views prevailed. The school of Hillel allowed divorce for nearly any reason including bad cooking. The school of Shammei said divorce is *not* lawful except for sexual impropriety. Jesus, like a good politician, carefully frames his answer. He doesn't choose sides. His answer has several parts. 1. He directs us to Scripture. "What does Moses say?" Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce his wife. 2. God allows divorce as a concession to human hardness of heart. 3. Divorce was never God's intention. 4. God wills for marriage to be a life-long commitment between a man and a woman. 5. Jesus says, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Wow! Powerful stuff. I don't even want to touch that.

Now notice how Mark places what Jesus said about divorce in the closest relationship to children.

Immediately following the divorce question (verse 13) Mark says, "People were bringing little children to him." So often, divorced parents stop bringing their children to Jesus; to Sunday School and Church. Divorce, more often than not, is harmful to a child's emotional and spiritual welfare. So I ask, "Is a good divorce better for children than a bad marriage?" Last month I read three articles answering that question. All three, like Jesus, related divorce to children.

A *Presbyterians Today* article quoted a government report: More married adults than ever say their marriages are unhappy. Teenage women are increasingly pessimistic about achieving happiness in marriage. Young people are far more open to single parenting and cohabitation. The number of cohabiting couples with children has increased 800% since 1970. The author of the article believes these trends bode ill for the next generation. One woman says, "My heart just cries out to children. If we don't lower the divorce rate for ourselves, we should do it for the children."

A recent *U.S. News and World Report* article claims a good divorce may be much *worse* than a bad marriage. Judith Wallerstein, who taught at the University of California (Berkeley), claims children of divorce

are more depressed, more aggressive, and much more likely to develop mental and emotional disorders later in life. They start sexual activity earlier, have more children out of wedlock, are less likely to marry, and if they do marry, are more likely to divorce. They're more likely to abuse drugs, turn to crime, and commit suicide. Conventional wisdom claims that divorce saves children from their parents' open marital conflict. Wallerstein contradicts conventional wisdom. She finds kids generally tune out their parents' quarrels and aren't much bothered by them. They don't much care whether their parents like each other or sleep in different beds. The children just need parents to stay together. Wallerstein isn't alone. There seems to be a shift – a major turnaround in thinking about divorce.

The cover of a recent *Time Magazine* read, "What Divorce Does to Kids." Inside, the article argues that for adults, divorce is a *conclusion* but for children it's a *beginning* of uncertainty. "Where will I live? Will I see my friends again? Will my mom's new boyfriend leave here too?"

These articles deeply disturb me because many faithful members of this congregation are divorced or children of divorce. So I want to emphasize - although growing up in a divorced family elevates the risk of certain kinds of problems, it need not doom children. In fact, physical abuse, substance addiction and other severe pathologies should not be tolerated in a marriage. Jesus said, "For their hardness of heart" divorce is lawful. So you're not required to hang in there when your spouse beats you physically or emotionally. It's not God's will for marriages to be abusive.

Nevertheless, according to so many studies, *ordinarily* a lousy marriage beats a great divorce - at least where children's welfare is concerned. Divorce is lawful, but it's far too common. According to one article, three quarters of divorcing couples say they don't quarrel very often. Why divorce? They say, "I'm just not as happy." "I've met somebody." "I have unmet needs." "I no longer love my spouse." But according to Linda Wait of the University of Chicago bad marriages are likely to improve. 86% of people who said they were in bad marriages *but who decided to stick it out* said five years later their marriages had turned around and were now happier. 60% said their marriages were now very happy. Bad marriages need not be permanently bad. Most improve with counseling and a supportive community.

I came a related article in *Parade* magazine in the *Lancaster Sunday News*: Couples who live together before they're married are *more* likely to get divorced and experience physical abuse than couples who *do not* live together before marriage. Conventional wisdom assumes the opposite. Not so according to this article! Cohabiting couples have a higher breakup rate than married couples, a lower level of household income, and a *much* higher level of domestic violence and child abuse. And children raised by cohabiting couples tend to be disadvantaged. The writer speculates that people who refrain from sexual relationships before marriage often do so because of deep religious commitment that views premarital sex as a sin. When these couples marry the same deep religious commitment enables them to work through the inevitable crises that come with every marriage because they believe God joined them together and no one should separate them.

In the light of what Jesus says, we need to say loudly, clearly, and firmly - marriage vows are among the most serious promises we make. In Thornton Wilder's play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Maggie says to her husband George, to whom she's been married about 5000 years, "I didn't marry you because you were perfect. I didn't even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage." The promise makes the marriage. When feelings of love wain, the promise remains. *I promise, before God and these witnesses to be your loving and faithful spouse, in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health; as long as we both shall live.*

Pharisees asked Jesus a question about God's Law. But Law isn't the last word. Grace is God's last word. The last word is not our broken promises, but God's faithful promise. God's grace is often experienced most fully by divorced people and children of divorce who know brokenness at its very worst. The church that believes in God's grace welcomes divorced people and encourages them to use their gifts for the glory of God. A church that experiences God's grace encourages single people to refrain from sex outside of marriage, and the married couples to remain faithful. A church that believes in God's grace doesn't make legalistic judgments on people who live together outside marriage but welcomes them because we have confidence God's grace can accomplish what God's Law can't. The last word of the church is grace, not law. Out of the tears of divorce

can come hope. God heals even the most wounded heart. God can open the door to a new relationship of love and commitment that could not have been known with the first partner. The key in all of this is never give up easily on any relationship. Married couples, save your children, keep your promises. Do not give up easily on your marriage! And all of us who witness the marriage vows of our friends and loved ones - do everything in your power to uphold them in their marriage?

Let us pray: Gracious God, you are always faithful in your love for us. Look mercifully upon us. Let your Holy Spirit rest upon us so that with steadfast love we may honor the promises we make, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.