

My Obnoxious Relative

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 2, 1994, the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Scripture Lessons: Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:7-16.

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

I have an obnoxious relative whose name will go unmentioned. When the family gathers I hear people saying, "I hope he doesn't show up. If he does, I'm leaving." What makes him so obnoxious? He makes inappropriate comments; sometimes racist comments, sometimes comments demeaning women, sometimes it's gay bashing. He has a way of talking inappropriately for the occasion. I thought of him when I discovered last week that the Gospel lesson for World Communion Sunday is about divorce. Every year it shows up in the lectionary lessons like my obnoxious relative. Every year I grimace when I see it coming. But talking about divorce seems especially inappropriate on World Communion Sunday.

And yet maybe this is an appropriate time to talk about divorce. Sometimes it's good to gather the whole family together to talk about a very serious matter. Divorce concerns almost everyone here. We all know divorced people or people contemplating divorce. Friends. Relatives. Daughters. Sons. Some of *us* are divorced. About half the children in a typical elementary school live with only one parent. I wouldn't be surprised if divorce has touched everybody here in some way. Broken homes. Broken families. Broken hearts. The Risen Christ knows about our brokenness. He took our brokenness upon himself. He feels our brokenness. His body was broken for us.

In our Gospel lesson some religious leaders came to Jesus to test him. That

should tip us off right away that they wanted to trap him. There's no indication that they were experiencing marital problems. There's no indication that they wanted to minister to divorced men and women. There's no indication that they were sympathetic in anyway to the stresses and strains that destroy marriages. They came to test Jesus. They remind me of some people who come to church, not in order to *hear* the gospel preached, but in order to see *if* the gospel is being preached.

They asked Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" And Jesus answers, "What did Moses command you?" In other words, what does the Bible say. The first five books of the Bible were attributed to Moses. The religious leaders correctly point to an Old Testament passage where Moses allowed a man to divorce his wife.

Jesus answered, "For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. 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.' So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder."

Now how did people understand Jesus? Did they hear good news or bad news? My informed guess is that men who wanted to get rid of their wives heard bad news. My guess is that most women heard good news. Among Palestinian Jews, divorce was entirely in the hands of men. A man could divorce his wife for adultery. A man could divorce his wife if he found another more attractive woman.

But Jewish women couldn't divorce their husbands for any reason. Most women wouldn't want a divorce even if their marriage was crummy. A divorced woman suffered incredible humiliation. She had two choices at most. She could return to her parents home if they were still alive. Or she could descend into the dark world of prostitution or short term relationships with men in order to stay alive. Jesus had good news for Jewish women. You should not fear being divorced.

Jesus went on to teach his disciples privately, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her." Richard Foster comments that "Jesus was condemning the callousness by which a man would marry and divorce and remarry with the same ease as he might buy and sell cattle." Jesus also said, "If she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

This is interesting since Jewish women couldn't divorce husbands. But, most likely, people knew Jesus was talking about Herodias. Herodias married her uncle Philip and lived with him in Rome. Then she fell in love with another uncle. Since she had Roman citizenship she had the right to divorce her husband and marry her husband's brother. Jesus didn't name names, but everybody living in Palestine knew he was talking about Herodias.

What about today? How do we understand and apply God's word to our lives today? Presbyterians seek to be faithful to the spirit and intent of Scripture? We try to understand all of Scripture in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

1. Presbyterians believe that marriage was designed by God to last a lifetime. Jesus said, "What therefore God has joined together, let no one put asunder." Our Directory for Worship requires ministers to "provide for a discussion with the man and the woman concerning... the vows and commitments they will be asked to make... (and concerning) the resources of the faith and the Christian community to assist them in fulfilling their marriage commitments." Marriage was meant to last a lifetime.

2. We believe that divorce is not the will of God anymore than spouse abuse is the will of God. Divorce is not the will of God anymore than cancer which requires the amputation of an arm or leg is the will of God. Divorce always frustrates God's intention for two people. God never wants divorce. Divorce always destroys the possibility for a marriage to be like the marriage in Genesis, where "a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and the two become one." Divorce is never God's will and always adulterates the meaning of marriage.

3. The Presbyterian Church has always recognized the reality (and sometimes, even the necessity) of divorce and the possibility of remarriage. Physical and psychological abuse can destroy a couple unless they separate. Just as Siamese twins must be separated if they're to survive, some couples must be separated lest they kill or cripple one another. The Westminster Larger Catechism states, on the basis of God's Word, that "the weaknesses of one or both partners may lead to gross and persistent denial of the marriage vows so that marriage

dies at the heart and the union becomes intolerable; yet only in cases of extreme, unrepented-of, and irremediable unfaithfulness (physical or spiritual) should separation or divorce be considered.” Divorce is not the will of God, but it is permitted for the hardness of our hearts.

4. Presbyterians believe that when a marriage ends in divorce, Christians count on the grace of God that both forgives sinful people and enables them to make fresh starts including the possibility of new marriage for divorced persons. Backed up by numerous Biblical passages, The Westminster Larger Catechism says, “The remarriage of divorced persons may be sanctioned by the church, in keeping with the redemptive gospel of Christ, when sufficient penitence for sin and failure is evident, and a firm purpose of an endeavor after Christian marriage is manifested.” Remarriage is possible in the Presbyterian Church

5. Our Presbyterian Church needs divorced people who want to use the gifts God gave them. Our Book of Order states that “Persons of ... *different marital conditions (married, single, widowed, or divorced)* shall be guaranteed full participation and access to representation in the decision making of the Church.” In other words, divorce shall not exclude a church member from receiving Holy Communion nor from serving Christ as an elder, deacon or minister. We certainly don’t need divorce, but we do need divorced people who want to serve Christ. If you are a divorced person, we need you every bit as much as we need single people and married people.

Finally, we come to the Table of the Lord not as married or divorced or

single men and women. We come as children. We don't come congratulating ourselves for a successful marriage. Nor do we exclude ourselves for a failed marriage. We come as little children. Parents love and accept a little child without regard to anything it's done or failed to do. A little child can't wash itself. A little child can't feed itself. A little child must be washed and fed. The Risen Christ washes us in baptism and feeds us in Holy Communion. He does for us what we can't do for ourselves. When we come to this Table as little children the Risen Christ takes us in his arms, blesses us and lays his hands upon us.

Come to the Table! Come as little children! Come, young and old! Come married couples, single people, divorced. The invitation to the Lord's Supper is extended to all who've been baptized, ^{Remember,} remembering ~~that~~ access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, ^{It's} ~~but~~ a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. ^{Prepare now} ~~Preparing~~ to receive Christ in this Sacrament. Confess the sin and brokenness in your lives. Seek reconciliation with God and neighbor (including husband or wife). And, above all, trust in Jesus Christ for cleansing and renewal. Even one who doubts or whose trust is wavering may come to the Table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Christ Jesus.

Lord God, you set us in families, where we learn to live together in love and truth. Strengthen weak bonds of love. Where separation threatens, move in with forgiving power. Melt hard hearts, free fixed minds, break the hold of stubborn pride. Lay claim on us, so that our separate claims may be set aside in love. And help men and women whose marriages fail to know that you are faithful. Restore confidence, bring understanding, and ease the hurt of separation. If they marry others, instruct them in better love, so that vows may be said and kept with new resolve; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.