

Till Death Do Us Part

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 19th Sunday after Pentecost, October 2, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 128; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:9-11; *Mark 10:2-16*.

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

Charles knelt down on the floor beside Claire and sobbed, "I'm sorry. I lost control. It won't happen again." He took her in his arms and they sat together in silence. Charles gently touched Claire where he'd hit her. It was as if he believed his touch could now undo the brutal blows he had unleashed moments before. After a time Claire stood up, not saying a word, and went into the bathroom to wash away traces of the violence. She dressed so her bruises wouldn't show. She hoped no one would notice. Charles and Claire were in time for the Sunday morning worship service at church.

In the days that followed, Claire blamed herself. She assumed she was at fault, not he, that it was her failure as a wife and Christian that prompted the ugly incident. During 18 years of marriage, Claire was beaten by Charles hundreds of times. She never told anyone. Appearances were kept up at church. Only toward the end did she seek help. Claire was a strong supporter of traditional values. She felt they were important for the family and society. She held a high view of marriage. She also believed that Jesus Christ can and does change lives.

But one day after a similar assault by her husband she went to her pastor for help. She said she didn't believe in divorce, but her life was in danger. The minister didn't understand. He told her she married for better or for worse, until death should part them. She should go home and pray and work it out and try not to upset her husband. He said that the biblical teaching about divorce is clear and comes straight from the lips of Christ.

But there's something disturbing about the pastor who, confronted by a

woman who's been violently battered, or emotionally traumatized, immediately starts flipping the pages of Scripture, quoting the biblical texts on the subject of marriage and divorce. After all, do we really need chapter and verse to recognize the wrong, the horrendous evil, done to the woman?

Claire walked away from the pastor's home that night in deep anguish. It was the last time she went to church for many years. After so many beatings she decided not to go back to her husband again. She sought and got a divorce. Through counseling she was able to begin life again. She got a good job and began working for the first time outside the home. She began to feel she could make it on her own. She began to feel that she had something valuable to offer society. At work she met a man who also had been divorced. His name was Jim. They began to talk at lunch and during breaks, then they began meeting after work. They had so much in common. Both of them were estranged from the church but they were believers. He had a gentleness about him that she'd never before experienced in a man. Both had great fear and apprehension about getting involved again with someone but with the counsel and support of friends they finally decided on marriage.

Claire and Jim wanted to begin their married life together right and this meant for them that they both wanted God to be at the center of their marriage. Church had once been so important for both of them until their divorce and they wanted it to be important again. They decided to attend a neighborhood church. Everything was going great until the pastor got up to announce the Gospel lesson. It was Mark 10:2-16. "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." The

minister read the text without comment and based his sermon on the epistle lesson. Claire and Jamie remembered nothing else during the rest of the worship service. They left church angered and hurt. They felt betrayed by the church and by Jesus.

Monday morning the minister was going down the list of visitors from Sunday's service and saw the names of Jim and Claire. He tried to visit newcomers to the worship service if able. So he stopped by on Monday evening, without telephoning, hoping to find Jim and Claire at home. He found them very cool and wondered what the problem could be. Finally he asked, "Is there anything wrong? Did you find the congregation unfriendly?" Jamie took a deep breath and look down at the floor and began to speak, "Pastor, it was the Gospel lesson about divorce and adultery. My wife and I were both married before. Both of us use to be active in the church until our divorce but after hearing that I don't feel I could ever be active again."

He went on. "I know I've sinned. But I believe my sin was when I got married the first time. It was a foolish, immature mistake. We were too young. We didn't know what we were doing. I've asked God to forgive me for making the mistake of getting married that first time and I'm not sorry I got divorced even though it was one of the most difficult times in my life."

Then Jim turned and looked at his wife. "I believe that this woman sitting beside me is the one God intended me to marry all along but I was blind and obstinate and I wasn't in God's will so I made a tragic mistake."

Jim then looked into the eyes of the minister. "I have friends who didn't get married. They simply lived with their girl friends and drifted in and out of many relationships. Later these people settled down and got

married without having the stigma of divorce. But I couldn't do that."

Up till this time the minister had said nothing. And now all he could say was, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't know." He regretted having read the Gospel lesson without comment. He even regretted that it was in the Bible. Why didn't anybody ever come to Jesus and ask, "Rabbi, my husband beats me. What should I do?" Or, "Rabbi, I got married too young. I was pregnant and we felt like we had to get married. But it's just not working. What should I do?"

Apparently Jesus didn't get asked these questions; at least we don't read about them in the gospels. One reason is because the Jews had been conditioned by their religious teachers to see that every last detail of life was covered by the law, so that you'd always know who was in the right and who was in the wrong. But no law can compel us to do what God requires of married couples.

The minister groped for words and finally said, "Yesterday's Gospel lesson isn't all that we know of Jesus' attitude about divorce. There's also a word of mercy and understanding. Remember when Jesus met the woman at the well, a woman married five times and living with still another man? Or remember when a woman was brought to him caught in the very act of adultery? Or remember the woman who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears? Jesus never condemned them. He never says, 'You wicked person. God is ashamed of you and so am I.' Instead, he speaks to their loneliness, to their fear, to their desire to live a life that's happy and full and pleasing to God. He offers them forgiveness and new life. And that's mercy.

He continued, "Divorce, from Jesus' perspective, is part of the brokenness of human life, it's part of the sadness and pain that haunts this

imperfect existence of ours. Jesus knows the pain, the hurt, and the disappointment that divorce brings and offers us hope that life can be whole again. I think God's heart breaks for those who divorce. I think God is thoroughly against it, in the way Jesus indicated God was. But who of us is for it? Who of us in marrying and trusting our lives to another would ever do so if we knowingly did it thinking it would end in divorce? None of us. And I suspect God understands that as well."

And then the pastor said, "I'm happy that you've found one another and that you want God's best for your life. There are many people like you in our church. People who are divorced. ^{Some whose husbands or wives have left after years of marriage.} People who are remarried. ^{Some who have remarried.} And it's wonderful to see how God ^{has used} ^{is using} these people to help and support couples like yourselves. Forgive me for reading that Gospel lesson without comment. And will you come again? I'd like to introduce you to some wonderful people who have stories similar to yours and I want you to see how God is using them."

Claire and Jim were in church the next Sunday. It was the beginning of a new season of their lives with God and with God's people.

Let us pray: God of grace: you are always working to hold us together, to heal division, and make love strong. Help men and women whose marriages break up 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.

For Those engaged to marry. Almighty God, in the beginning you made man and woman to join themselves in shared affection. May those who engage to marry be filled with joy. Let them be so sure of each other that no fear or disrespect may shake their vows. Though their eyes may be bright with love for each other, keep in sight a wider world, where neighborhood and strangers beg, and where service is a joyful duty;

① For Those in marital difficulty: hold God, who set us in families, where we learn to live together in charity 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...