

What God Has Joined Together

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Mark 10:2-16

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This scripture today contends hard sayings about marriage and divorce that seem to divide and demoralize us. Sadly, this passage has been brutally painful in our day to people who have gone through divorce, making them feel as if even Jesus is against them. For centuries it was made into a law and couples were unable to find a divorce. It has been a wound to the lesbian, gay and transgender communities for implying that love and marriage are only between a man and a woman, and divorce is also found in same sex marriage. Legalism and judgmentalism have been around as long as people have, especially in religious circles.

Does this have to be only between a man and a woman? I don't believe so. God in Genesis realizes that it is not right that a person should be alone, that companionship is needed. The poet Rumi's love poems are mostly written about his teacher and true friend, Shams of Tabriz. Our soul needs another to be a mirror to bring us out of

ourselves, to be able to truly be ourselves. Marriage celebrates this kind of unity, this intimacy of the heart that makes us complete somehow.

But doesn't always work. Marriages and relationships don't always work out. People get divorced. Friendships fall apart. People get greedy, jealous, resentful, angry. We hurt each other terribly. Relationships bring up a lot of pain and conflict. Intimacy brings us extremely close, close enough to know each other deeply and fully, but also close enough to terribly hurt and cut each other.

These dumb jokes illustrate this.

A Woman's prayer: "Dear Lord, I pray for wisdom, to understand a man; love, to forgive him; and patience, for his moods. Because, Lord, if I pray for strength, I'll just beat him to death."

A woman says "Men are like fine wine. They all start out like grapes, and it's our job to stomp on them and keep them in the dark until they mature into something we'd like to have dinner with."

A young lady came home from a date looking sad. She told her mother, "Jeff proposed to me an hour ago."

"Then why are you so sad?" her mother asked.

"Because he also told me he was an atheist. Mom, he doesn't even believe there's a hell!"

Her mother replied, "Marry him anyway. Between the two of us, we'll show him how wrong he is."

Look at how Jesus handles judgment in our scripture today. The Pharisees throw down an attack: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Legally in Jesus' day it was an accepted practice, for a man, but not for a woman, to divorce, by simply writing a certificate of divorce or saying "I divorce you" three times. This left women with no way to fend for themselves in a world in which men were the only ones who could hold jobs or handle money. Women were left destitute, to become either beggars or prostitutes. A strong argument is that Jesus stated this teaching to protect women.

Jesus shifts the discussion from a legal discussion to a religious one. He focuses not on the law of Moses but on the intention of God from the beginning of time. "... and the two shall become one flesh." (Mark 10:8) Jesus expands the vision. He reminds them that what God intends is that we attain a kind of unity of heart and soul and flesh that Adam and Eve had – two becoming one. That is a tall order, and goes way beyond simple definitions and laws. It is about letting go of self, and attaining unity of heart.

God's desire, in the Garden of Eden, is for us to live in harmony and unity; to seek holy companionship. *"Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'" (Gen. 2:18)* "It is not good to be alone." That is the message we hear. God's intention is for companionship, for intimacy, for unity. In the Garden of Eden, the ideal is for us to be able to find a unity with others, to have friends, helpers, and to be in community with others. We are meant to be open and honest and true.

The point that Jesus is making today is not to lay down rigid rules, but to push beyond the legalism of the Pharisees. They want to make it all about laws – what Moses laid down – what it says in the rule book. But no, Jesus looks beyond the law to the essence of what God wants for us. God's love seeks absolute unity of heart and mind – not just for women and men, but for all people – gay or straight, of all backgrounds, races, nationalities. God would like nothing better than to have us live 'on earth as it is in heaven.' In other words, perfect love, harmony, peace.

That's the ideal – and Jesus works on that level. He throws down extreme challenges like "take up our cross every day or 'sell all our possessions and give them to the poor'. Also, he would prefer that our marriages and relationships live up to God's idyllic model of absolute love, sharing, and unity.

But Jesus also gets that we don't live in the ideal – we reside in the real, the flawed, the imperfect. Conflicts and divisions erupt, people fall out of love, abuse and neglect have a toll. Jesus balances reality with forgiveness, law with love. On the other side of ideal love is forgiveness and grace. It's a hope, not a law or a rule, these are dreams to strive toward, mountains to climb. If and when we don't sell all of our possessions or get up on the cross – then we are given grace, love, and forgiveness – reminding us that we are human and that God loves us as we are.

We live East of Eden. People move from the Garden of Eden, where each partner stands naked before the other in trust and love, and into the real battleground, where each puts on armor and wields weapons of every kind. Relationships break-down into warring factions, filled with resentments and accusations and hatreds. Like magnets that when broken in half repel each other, so intimate relationships, when they break apart, repel each other. Broken pieces cut and wound the other. We live East of Eden.

Truth be told, we are all sinners. We are all in God's merciful hands, and cannot claim our own stairway to heaven. So, when we don't live up to the idea we need to treat others and ourselves with a measure of grace and forgiveness. Jesus tells us not to judge – to be kind to each other – and to leave the judgment to the one judge: God.

An ancient story of the desert fathers tells of a community that was holding a meeting of all the monks in order to expel a member of the community who had sinned. The abbot of the monastery didn't come and a monk went to him and pleaded with him to come to the meeting. So, the old man walked into the chapel, dragging a broken pot by a rope. The pot was filled with sand, and it spilled a trail out behind him as he entered. He told the assembly, "My sins flow out behind me every day like sand, and you are asking me to judge one of my fellow monks?" The assembly decided to forgive their fellow monk, and went on with their prayers.

The bible teaches a balance of purity and grace, of law and love. This runs throughout all of the bible. None of us are perfect; we all fall down, we all are struggling. But in the midst of this we find God's faithfulness and unconditional love. We are not left in our shame and brokenness, but called to be forgiven, to stand up again and again, and to continue the journey toward the ideal. We need less bible bashing and more compassion and concern for victims and those struggling with trauma and awful choices.

Jesus calls us to move beyond legalism, beyond the warfare and violence, to forgiveness, to peace, to the Kingdom of God – in which we find we can truly love and trust each other. The other side of law is grace and forgiveness. We don't live up to all of God's intentions for us. We are not perfectly united to our neighbors, in our relation to the poor, in our nations, in our financial dealing, or in our marriages.

Jesus asks that we become one – even as he and God are one. That is a tall order. The goal is not just happiness: it is achieving what God intends for all of us – true spiritual wholeness – unity – harmony - Shalom. Jesus' understanding of marriage is that it is not a legal document, or a contract from the law of Moses, but it is becoming one flesh – one heart – as Adam and Eve were one at the beginning of time. To do that we must forgive each other.

Walter Wangerin, Jr. wrote this: *Please know that it isn't your spouse's sin which crucifies you, though you might have thought so; rather, it's your loving willingness to forgive. That was the cross of Christ, the cross you take up when you deny yourself and follow him. Therefore, forgiving will not immediately soothe your pain; instead, it introduces a different pain, a much more hopeful pain because it is redeeming. You do 'deny yourself' and die a little in order to forgive. Pride dies. Fairness dies. Rights die, as do self-pity and the sweetness of a pout or the satisfaction of a little righteous wrath.... You die a little, that the marriage might rise alive.*

Love and forgiveness in marriage, mirrors the love and forgiveness of God – and leads us to the cross. It leads us to see that it is in self-giving love that we discover our true selves. But it doesn't always work. Divorce and division happen, and leaving is the best option. So, the other side of the gospel is forgiveness and grace. Jesus does not abandon us. We are given another chance to claim the joy, unity and intimacy that God intends for us. God calls us to move beyond legalism and judging to forgiveness and renewal. Let it be so. Amen.