

October 11, 2016

The National Presbyterian Church

“What Jesus said: Love and Marriage

Mark 10:1-12, Mark 7:20-23, Matthew 5:27-30, 19:10-12

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In our sermons this fall we’re looking at statements of Jesus – “What Jesus said.” Jesus spoke about a wide variety of topics

From politics -- to prayer

From our lives *as* individuals -- to our lives *in* community with others

From what we do with our mouths -- to what we do with our ears

Last Sunday we thought together about listening: “*Let anyone with ears to hear,*” said Jesus: “*Hear!*” We thought together about listening *to God* as a fundamental act of worship; and listening *to one another* as a fundamental act of love.

This Sunday we move on to the words Jesus’ spoke that we read in our passages today: words about the intention of God in the moment of creation; words about love, marriage, sex and divorce – topics every bit as hot and tricky, and divisive and personal back then as now.

And the context was this: some of those opposed to Jesus come up to him and ask him about marriage and divorce: “*Is divorce biblically justifiable? Or lawful in the sight of God? or not?*”

It was a legitimate question, because in the books of Moses, the torah, in Deuteronomy 24, God seems to permit divorce, but not in a way that settled the matter of right and wrong categorically.

In fact, in the first century, when Jesus was alive, a battle was raging among two factions of Judaism as to whether Moses’ words reflected a *grudging* permission (a concession) -- or an *easy* permission (a normal option)

- On the one hand, the followers of a rabbi called Shammai thought that the reasons for divorce, if any, should be very few and far between.
- While, on the other hand, the followers of another rabbi called Hillel, thought that it wasn’t really a big deal at all. If your wife burned the cooking (*note: this is male oriented*) and you made a public announcement (“*I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you!*”), it was *fait accompli* -- on to the next wife! (Which may not have been a big deal for *the men*; but was generally tragic for *the women*, who often had no other means of support).

Of course, the particular issue they raised (divorce) is not as big-a-deal now for us (generally) as it was for them back then – or even, say for us 50-60 years ago. But think of other areas of sexuality in recent years – and you’ll get a pretty clear picture of the charge in the atmosphere as Jesus was asked the question.

So the question *behind the question* -- the trick *within the question* was – “*Whose side was Jesus on?*” If Jesus’ opponents could get him to choose one side or another *then* they’d divide and conquer, *and* he’d lose half his following, which was, as far as they were concerned, a step in the right direction.

And this was their expectation. In fact, the expectation from Jesus, based on what he had generally said or demonstrated, was surely that he was almost guaranteed to take the side of Rabbi Hillel, not Shammai; the side of grace and mercy, *not* harshness and judgment.

Think, for example, about the story at the beginning of John 8:1-12, where a group of men set a trap in which a woman could be caught in the act of adultery -- *the man (conveniently?) escapes*, and the woman is standing in front of everyone with a hostile crowd eager to punish her and they're inviting Jesus to join them! But Jesus won't do it! Instead, he says, "*If anyone is without sin, throw the first stone*" And when there's silence, he turns to the woman and says, "*Can no one be found to condemn you? Neither do I!*" And then he adds -- "*Go, sin no more!*"

It's wonderful! It's gracious! It feels sort of like Pope Francis -- and it certainly felt like the spirit of Rabbi Hillel!

So, when Jesus answers the question in Mark 10 in an unexpected way -- more toughly, more stringently, than either side -- than either Hillel or Shammai, *seemingly slamming the door on ALL divorce*, it's not just half of them who are in shock but the whole crowd, including Jesus' closest followers! (They can't believe it and they begin to mutter that marriage may not be such a good idea after all! -- Matt. 19:10-12).

What Jesus said that was so shocking was this:

"Because of your hardness of heart Moses wrote this commandment for you. (In other words, these words from Moses are a concession of some kind, not a mandate).

⁶*But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.'*

⁷*'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.'*

So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

⁹*Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."*

These are not just the words of a minister in a wedding -- *but the words of Jesus himself*. Words that are pretty blunt! Words that probably make SOME of us here feel very uncomfortable indeed.

Though of course, the truth is -- they should actually make ALL of us very uncomfortable indeed!

And Why? Well, not because of the last words Jesus says, the words specifically about never separating, but because of the first words about "the beginning," God's original intent.

The fact is that *none of us* lives a life the way God intended life to be lived "*in the beginning*"! "*In the beginning*" -- if that's the standard, God's original intent, then *all of us fall short*.

So that Jesus' intention is ultimately to make *everyone* squirm (and they do) by bringing his questioners (and us with them) back to a standard (*God's intention in the beginning*) that *all* of us miss in some way shape or form. Not just a few -- but ALL!

Which may feel a little confusing -- *this idea that Jesus deliberately said something provocative in order to make everyone feel uncomfortable and squirm*; confusing -- especially when we remember Jesus' gracious response to the woman caught in adultery.

At first blush, at least, Jesus *didn't want* to make the woman squirm at all, but wanted to bring her comfort (at least in front of her accusers). BUT a closer look at the story shows that that's not the whole truth: Jesus certainly says, quite deliberately -- "*I don't condemn you!*" But he also adds this: "*Go sin no more!*" As if to say: "*I'm not out to get you, in fact, I love you! But, still, what you did was wrong -- not God's path -- and you need to change your ways.*" (And I wonder if, at that moment, he held her gaze uncomfortably until she nodded, and felt a sense of conviction).

So that the best way to describe Jesus is not just as “*a bleeding heart*” – gentle Jesus, meek and mild. There’s no question: He loved “*to comfort the afflicted.*”

BUT Rather, the best way to describe the Jesus of Scripture is to remember that he also loved, *just as much* – “to afflict the comfortable” not to leave us with grace that’s cheap, but **to leave us all, at times, feeling uneasy, unsettled, put out, disrupted – and, yes, guilty in some way shape or form.**

- Disrupted enough at least – so we get mad: and either try to get rid of him from our lives (*and some people literally tried to do that! – you don’t get crucified for merely being “gentle, meek and mild.” Jesus made people mad! Mad enough to crucify him.*)
- OR (and this is what he really wants) disrupted enough, mad enough to admit he’s right! And then, not to push him off, but to let him in, to probe our lives like a physician or a therapist. Mad enough to acknowledge that we need his help, realizing that every day of our lives *we all hurt God, hurt others, hurt ourselves, and miss the mark, of God’s original intention!*

As I’ve said before from this pulpit: we’re all on “Plan B” in *some* areas of life. We’ve all missed God’s Plan A (*God’s intent in the beginning*) in some areas of life, if not *many!*

So Jesus, here, is out to make everyone mad, or feel bad, or, at least make everyone sit up and pay attention, which in some ways goes very much against the spirit of our age.

These days, making anyone feel uncomfortable – hinting that some behaviors may actually not be right or pleasing to God, or giving a strongly worded contrary opinion to the prevailing norm, can sometimes lead to cheap accusations of hate speech (*I certainly think that there IS such a thing as hate speech, but some accusations are just cheap shots!*); and at other times, can actually get you un-invited from speaking at some of even our most prestigious college campuses.

This past spring the President himself acknowledged that things had gone too far in this direction and at Howard University’s graduation, he pointed out, among other things, that “*unwillingness to hear other points of view can be just as unhealthy on the left as on the right.*”

<http://reason.com/blog/2016/05/11/president-obama-support-free-speech>

And a year ago, *The Atlantic* (September 2015) printed an article (by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt) with the opening header saying:

In the name of emotional well-being, college students are increasingly demanding protection from words and ideas they don’t like. Here’s why that’s disastrous for education—and mental health.

And then the great title: “*The Coddling of the American Mind*” (playing off Alan Bloom’s classic book entitled “*The Closing of the American Mind*”).

Well -- Jesus loved *to love!* But he also had no intention of *coddling!*

And in this case, Jesus was an equal opportunity offender, who *coddled* no one!

So, if you put our passages together with others in which Jesus speaks about marriage and intimacy, what you find is something like this: that Jesus understands marriage and sexual intimacy

- not in the context of *coddling*- but in the context of *calling*
- not in the context of *rights*- but in the context of *responsibility*
- not in the context merely of *feelings*- but in the context of *God’s original intent*

The world around us sees so many issues *only* in the context of rights. And from a political point of view I’d certainly agree that that’s *often* how it ought to be. That’s how you get *as much justice* to as many people as possible – you generally focus on rights. This, by the way, is what the Bible does repeatedly with regard to treatment of immigrants: one law, equal rights for citizens and aliens, for both! Give the powerless their rights! (See Numbers 15:29, Leviticus 24:22).

BUT within the context in which Jesus was speaking in Mark 10 (thinking of our individual response to God and others, as his followers) this language of *rights* as the approach to developing an ethic is just *not* Jesus' approach at all!

And, more than that the language of "feeling" -- using "feeling" as a moral arbiter -- is just as foreign to Jesus! The idea that the moral thing to do is simply to *follow our feelings*; as if *what we feel is natural for us* -- determines what's right -- this is very far from the way Jesus thinks or speaks.

In fact -- when our thoughts and feeling are out of line with "God's intention in the beginning" (Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount -- think *anger and lust*) our duty is actually to *fight our thoughts and feelings all the way!* Even if it's painful! ("*If your eye offend you: pluck it out!*" Matthew 5:27-30).

So, first things first, says Jesus!

Seek God's will, remember God's original intent, pursue God's highest purpose for our lives, as if we were there, in the beginning!

- Even when it's hard,
- Or when we miss the mark!
- And even, too -- when *huge numbers of people* miss the mark and we find ourselves in a minority (not a moral *majority*, but a moral *minority!*); even then, and perhaps especially then, Jesus' words challenge us
 - not to change or lower the standards
 - or to spend our time condemning others!!
 - but to pick ourselves up, and keep aiming high.

That's what Jesus was trying to get his followers to do when asked about divorce and when he said:

"Because of your hardness of heart

Moses wrote this commandment for you.

⁶*But from the beginning of creation, (God's original intent)*

'God made them male and female.'

⁷*'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother*

and be joined to (cleave to) his wife,

⁸*and the two shall become one flesh.'*

So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

⁹*Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."*

Not the soft answer but the hard one!

In fact, so hard (remember), that Jesus' disciples turn to him and say cynically, *that it's probably best not to get married at all!!*

To which Jesus, in effect, responds, as if to say,

"NOW you're getting the picture! Marriage is not a lark! Not a right! (for Christians at least) but a calling from God!"

In fact he would say that *both marriage AND singleness are callings and responsibilities from God.* And without God's guidance and help neither -- if we seek God's intent -- is usually easy.

So that as someone once put it

- there are just as many folks *wanting to get out of marriage* (thinking that the grass on the other side of the fence is greener)
- as there are folks *wanting to get in*

As if changing our status was a more powerful solution than changing our minds – the way we think and believe!!

Without our utter dependence on God; without allowing Jesus to bother us; without allowing Jesus to enter in and help us in the intimate places of our deepest secrets and fears, the fact is that we'll almost certainly do less than our best at both marriage AND singleness!!

In my own case, my marriage, “letting Jesus in,” primarily had to do with allowing someone else in to probe deeply on Jesus’ behalf! A human angel, a messenger from God!

I’ve shared with some of you before, that 15-20 years into our marriage, Currie and I went through a pretty rough patch, and without the help of a counselor named Bob, I doubt that we’d have made it. And since then (it’s been over 20 years since then) we’ve often found ourselves asking *what in the world we’d have done, or where we’d be, if we hadn’t buried our pride and shared with Bob*. He was a gift from God!

And it may well be that in this congregation there’s a person who is a gift from God, an angel, for you too: a Deacon? a Stephen minister? a pastor? a counselor? a member of your small group? – someone who can be the presence of Jesus for you – helping you deal with the sting and challenge of Jesus’ words. Walking with us through a time of conviction, or being unsettled. Or in starting again, whatever the cause.

Whether or not we find this person or choose to share – this much I know: that the worst thing we can do is to close our ears, ignore Jesus’ words, seek to get rid of him or silence him, just because it doesn’t feel good!

God’s intention for your life and mine is too important. Life “in the beginning.”

Settle for nothing less!

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