



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

The Dream_ - The Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost- 10_3_2021

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life giving God. Amen.

So as you just heard, the Pharisees are trying to test Jesus to see if He will contradict the law of Moses, which laid out some rules for divorce. Jesus instead reminds them why those rules exist in the first place. They were concessions of sorts because of our hardheartedness, because of our brokenness. They didn't represent God's hope, they were guardrails for when our relationships go off the rails. And so rather than get drawn into the debate, Jesus, instead points back to the creation story and to the dream of God that we would be one. As the father and I are one, that we would be one.

That's a dream not just for married people, but for all of us that we would all live one day again, reconciled in perfect harmony, loving one another as ourselves as if we were one flesh once again. Jesus isn't interested in the details of divorce certificates. He's interested in calling us back to a new fidelity where all of us can see each other once again, as each other's keeper.

Now some call this a hard teaching, but part of me has to say, what did you expect Him to say? Asking Jesus to weigh in on the grounds of divorce, it's like asking Jesus, you know, I hear you on the need to forgive - that's a great idea by the way. But could you walk me through those times when you don't have to? Can you help me work out the exceptions there? Or you call us to be compassionate, and I just love the way that sounds, but help me understand when don't I have to be. Or Jesus, you know, you preach that we should love each other unconditionally with agape love and my, oh my, that is so beautiful. But, you know, I'm kind of a realist and help me to understand the exceptions. Certainly you don't expect us to love everyone.

Jesus didn't come to help us carve out more exceptions to love. We are already experts on that. He knows we have limitless capacity to come up with endless excuses and rationalizations for why we shouldn't have to love those people or why we shouldn't have to forgive that behavior. Like the prophets before Him, He calls us back to the dream and He came in person so that He might show us the way.

And so He points us back to the beginning to Genesis, where, if you might recall, God has one thing to say about His new creation over and over. God saw it and it was good. But when it comes to the second chapter, which you just heard,

well, now something's amiss. God has made a human being. The Hebrew word is not male person by the way, our translation notwithstanding, but non-gendered created being, He made this created being and he has paradise all to himself. As far as the eye can see, not a worry in the world, surrounded by the beauty of nature, watching the sunset every night, listening to the birds in the air and feeling the presence of God so very near. What more could you ask for, right? Is that not the perpetual mountain top experience being described?

And so what does God say when He sees that? Does He say, wow, it doesn't get any better than this, does it? No. God says that's not good. Think about that. Everything in creation is good, but creation wasn't finished. As long as this human being lived in isolation from others, the creation of a good human being, a complete human being wasn't finished. And so God split us in two. God creates a companion from our side. And once again, our translation says rib, but a better one would say from our side so that we might not be alone. Jesus is reminding us that we began as one. And so we are all hardwired for each other. We were made to find our completeness in each other.

That's the vision, not divorce certificates. Not litigating accusations of adultery. Jesus is reminding us that we were created for a world where all people live in harmony with ourselves, with one another, and God in sickness and in health, in good times or bad, for richer, for poor. And as you know, in the story, the Tree of Knowledge changed all that, of course. Despite our fears, despite our insecurities, despite the awareness of our nakedness and our attempts to cover ourselves up and hide from one another, to hide from God, despite our jealousies and our self-centeredness, our longing for companionship persists.

It's like a flame that refuses to go out. And so it leads us to create relationships and communities of all kinds, right? Families, close friendships, committed partnerships, marriages, churches, small groups, on and on, all of them little laboratories of love where vows are exchanged and commitments are made, some spoken, some unspoken, but all of what's intended to create the safe space that we need so we can start to experiment once again. To try on what life looks like when we're no longer alone, where we can experiment with compromise and letting go of our willfulness and our self-centeredness, where we can practice what it looks like to let our guard down and just relax and be ourselves.

No longer have to pretend to be someone we're not. Places where we can test out what life feels like and what we can become when we are accepted for who we are, as we are. These relationships, these laboratories of love as I'm calling them, they are sacred, all of them. Whether they're ever blessed in a church or not, because each of them in some way springs from that original longing placed in our heart by God and creation. And they are sacred because it is there

that we make our clumsy best efforts to try and to risk stitching our brokenness back together, and God bless them, they don't always last, do they?

Sometimes our hard heartedness, as Jesus refers, is the problem. And it can show up in a million ways. Sometimes it's our fears, our sinful desires leading us to betray our promises. Sometimes it's our inflexibility and our insistence on getting it our way. Sometimes it shows up in the relationships we should probably never have entered, vows that we had no business trying to take on at that stage in our life. Sometimes it shows up in relationships we probably should've left a while ago. We've become comfortable with our silent suffering.

Sometimes it can show up in our misdirected priorities and all the ways we get distracted from giving them the attention they so desperately need. And they can show up in the shame that we put on others for not being in one, and the pressure we put on our kids who maybe aren't ready for theirs yet. And they can also end quite naturally because I think our relationships are fluid because we are fluid. Our lives and our faith journey, it is a journey when we're truly living it. And so when our laboratories of love do their work, we start to grow as people, we start to change. We start to experience healing and wholeness.

So there will be times when we outgrow our relationships, where we can outgrow a friendship, where we can outgrow the church of our childhood or our parents' close mindedness. That's part of it too, I'm convinced. And some relationships need to end because they're abusive or toxic.

During my short-lived career, as a divorce attorney, I had several cases where abusive husbands needed to not only be divorced, but they needed to be put in jail. And I've had friendships that were wonderful for a time, but for one reason or another, turned into something that just wasn't any longer life-giving and it became clear that we could thrive better apart than together.

So, yeah. Marriages fail. Friends have fallouts. Feuds develop within families. Expectations are not met. People leave church. And we get defriended. And it is very painful. And depending on the degree of the commitment and the length of the relationship, we can feel like failures when they do. We can feel ashamed. We can even start to cover ourselves up again and hide.

And so if you have ever failed at a relationship, or if the relationship has ever failed you, don't be ashamed. Jesus isn't mad at you. Jesus isn't disappointed in you. Jesus is applauding you. Jesus is cheering you on. Yes, He wants us to nurture our relationship. Yes, He wants us to work on them as hard as we can and to do all that we can to reconcile them when they rupture. Yes. But as He also said, we are expected to fail from time to time as well. But the life of faith, it isn't about getting it right. It's not about being perfect. It's about taking a leap of faith. It's about taking the risk of opening your heart to others. It's about realizing

that God is present both at the "I do" at the beginning and at the "I'm sorry" at the end.

Paula D'arcy said that God comes to us disguised as our life. And the most common disguise, it seems to me, are the moments of our deepest pain. And so the pain and tragedy of divorce and broken relationships can also be a catalyst for faith and transformation, just as much as a successful one.

That was certainly true in my own divorce of sorts, though technically it wasn't a divorce because we couldn't be legally married. But we had been together for 10 years and built a life together. And so the feelings of failure, the guilt at what I should've done differently, the crippling fear about my future, worries about what people were going to say about me, all of that, just as real. I had just given up my law practice to go to work for the church, so I was not only broken hearted. I was looking at the real possibility of losing my home.

It was overwhelming to me. I was so ashamed. I couldn't talk to anyone about it, not even to God. So terrified and angry and determined to somehow hold it all together myself, somehow I'd even forgotten to pray. Until one day, emotionally and physically exhausted without warning, I fell to my knees and finally did and for the first time in my life placed my hands into God's. Not because I remembered to, but because it was all I had left. And it was then when I was so sure that my life was coming apart, that it started to come together. And over time, without asking for it, divorce blessed me with a whole new relationship with God and myself. That death in time gave way to resurrection.

Maybe that's why this gospel ends with Jesus inviting the little children to Him. They were the most disregarded in the ancient world. They had no standing, they were the most marginalized. And for those of us who have experienced a failed relationship of any kind, be it the falling out with a family member, a divorce, lost friendship, failures can be devastating and our culture can be relentlessly shaming and stigmatizing, and we can be so unforgiving of ourselves. And so it's easy for us in those moments to feel just as marginalized and forgotten.

And so, those going through it certainly need our love and they need our compassion, but they also deserve our admiration. For it is to such as these, that the kingdom of God belongs. Because anyone who has opened their heart, who has taken the risk of a relationship, who has taken the risk of community, who has taken the risk to love, you have, each of you, for a time at least, put yourself in God's hands and you would bet your life on the dream of God. May you never stop.

Amen.

