

**“Is There Life After Divorce”**  
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 25, 2019  
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**Holy Scriptures: Matthew 19: 1-12**

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. <sup>2</sup> Large crowds followed him, and he cured them there.

<sup>3</sup> Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?”

<sup>4</sup> He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ <sup>5</sup> and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? <sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” <sup>7</sup> They said to him, “Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?” <sup>8</sup> He said to them, “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. <sup>9</sup> And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.”<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>10</sup> His disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” <sup>11</sup> But he said to them, “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. <sup>12</sup> For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”

**Footnote:**

- a. Matthew 19:9 Other ancient authorities read *except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery*; others add at the end of the verse *and he who marries a divorced woman commits adultery*

***What Does the Church Need to Hear?***

This summer my family and I were in the Midwest on vacation. We drove down a country road that had a sign on the shoulder:

**LITTER COLLECTED BY  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR  
JESUS CHRIST  
...CHURCH**

Moving on down the road,  
I couldn't decide if I wanted to see that live in action,

or if we see it in action daily.

Way, way back in 1985, when I was a 25-year-old Associate Pastor in NYC,  
one night it was pouring rain when I emerged from a church meeting.  
Needing to get crosstown,  
feeling none too excited about walking several blocks in the rain  
to the bus stop and then waiting for the M-4, I hailed a taxi.  
Not many yellow taxis ventured into Spanish Harlem,  
so it must have been a gypsy cab.  
Whatever it was, I gratefully eased into the dry back seat.  
We got to talking, of course.  
As soon as the cabbie learned that I was an associate pastor,  
he shared a part of his story as we cruised slick city streets.  
*"I am in love with this woman. We want to get married.  
But you see, Preacher, I was divorced a long time ago.  
She says it doesn't matter, that she loves me.  
I told her that I read in the Bible what Jesus said about divorce,  
that it's like adultery if you get re-married after divorce.  
Neither of us wants to commit adultery, go against God.  
What should I do?"*

He'd faithfully read the Holy Scriptures in Matthew 19: 1-12  
(see also Luke 16: 18 and Mark 10:2-16).

Didn't Jesus say: "I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity,  
and marries another commits adultery." (Matt. 19: 9)  
The cabbie paused.

Clearly, he had looked for comfort in the Scriptures,  
and instead read a link between divorce and adultery,  
so he'd hung his head and come away  
believing that those who dissolve their marriage  
are condemned by God to never having a second chance,  
whether it's rebuilding a family of one or many.

### ***What Does the Church Needs to Hear?***

The Church of Jesus Christ needs to hear  
how people are reading, receiving, reacting to God's Word;  
we need to hear exactly what Jesus taught the Pharisees  
and is teaching us;  
and we need to hear how we can be & share the Good News.

I took a minute to think before speaking.  
When you are ordained, people will invite you into their lives.  
That is a great deal of trust.  
I never take it lightly or unadvisedly, but reverently and discreetly.

And since all of us who are baptized  
are ordained by our baptisms into Christian ministry,  
be ready, be prepared, expect for folks to invite you into their lives.  
That is a great deal of trust.

I caught the cabbie's eyes in the rear view mirror.

I responded that a closer reading of the dialogue  
between Jesus Christ and the Pharisees  
reveals that Jesus goes further,  
beyond the Deuteronomy 24:1-4 text they ask Him about  
They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?"  
When they go low, Jesus goes high.  
Jesus sensed the Pharisees vindictive intent to entrap Him in a theological snare.  
He responded by affirming that God's Love supersedes the Law of Moses.  
Love is a gift of God, I said.  
Relationships are primary,  
for they are an extension of the creative power of God.  
Jesus goes back, past Deuteronomy to the Creation story in Genesis.  
We're planted here on earth to be good stewards of creation and each other.  
Healthy, loving relationships like the one you share with your friend  
may be an extension of the creative power of God.  
Christ never descended to the lowest common denominator;  
instead He lifts us up to the highest plane, up to the level of unconditional love.

And you know the part right afterward,  
when Jesus spoke about including eunuchs who want to be in the Church,  
and when the disciples pushed away the children  
who wanted to draw near to Jesus?  
He welcomed them all, too,  
just as God welcomes those of us  
who have had hard times, damaged relationships,  
or are separated from those they once cared deeply about.  
God's grace (which is "divine love in action")  
and healing (which is "divine process toward wholeness")  
are continually, ceaselessly extended to families,  
families that come in all shapes, sizes and configurations.  
I like to think that instead of condemning divorced couples,  
Jesus affirmed the greater good,  
which is to support and care for one another as children of God.

"Sure, sure," said the cabbie,  
"but what about when Jesus said that divorce is like adultery?"

Good question.

***What Does the Church Needs to Hear?***

What does the church need to hear about what Jesus said about adultery?

Well, think about it:

how did Jesus Christ treat and talk with people  
accused of adultery, or to those doing the accusing?

Remember when male religious leaders brought to Jesus a woman, saying,

*“Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.*

*Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such.*

*What do you say about her?”*

*This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.*

*Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.*

*And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them,*

*“Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”*

*And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.*

*But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest,*

*and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.*

*Jesus looked up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”*

*She said, “No one, Lord.”*

*And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.” (John 8: 1-11)*

To the accusers,

He gave them room to look into their own hearts and actions,  
to check themselves out.

To the accused,

He made room for renewal, redemption, resurrection  
to discover life after loss, healing after hurt.

I told the cabbie that neither Christ nor I as an ambassador for Christ

are equating adultery and divorce; we both say that God does not condemn.

The Lord of Creation wants us to create healthy, loving relationships,

relationships in which we find nurture, encouragement,  
and delight in each other.

And when, for whatever reason, our relationships don't work out, God is nigh.

Omnipresent. Emanuel. God-With-Us.

Slow to anger, sure to forgive.

God does not hold our past--no matter what--against us as a weapon,

to stone us or cast us out or away or tear us apart.

We do that to ourselves and one another too often, and too well.

Rather, the God of grace and glory sits with us in our fractures and scars,

and leads us into fresh, new tomorrows of hope, today.

I asked the cabbie if that sounds like something Jesus said earlier in John's Gospel.

What did He say in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter?

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,*

*that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

*For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world,  
but that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3: 16-17)*

Sounds like a God who wants you to have life after divorce,  
not to be condemned but to be saved,  
like maybe God is with you in your new love, who is helping to save you.

We bonded over the Word and parted with a prayer and a nice tip.

### ***What Does the Church Needs to Hear?***

I wonder about the cabbie every now and then.  
I wonder if he and his beloved felt encouraged by this Church Ambassador  
to find love after loss;  
to make love real in the now of their lives;  
to trust that the God of Love and Grace  
wills for them to find happiness and wholeness, together.  
I wonder whether Christ’s Church is brave enough to look into the abyss,  
and trusting enough to know that Christ is already there,  
for you and for me,  
stretching out His arms and saying, “I love you this much!”  
I wonder about ways and whys the whole people of God have experienced loss.  
Damaged and divorced relationships are often wrought with pain and trauma;  
broken dreams, lost friendships, and disappointments  
litter the floor around us.  
Echoes of hard words reverberate.

I wonder about the pressure we feel to take sides,  
to choose whom to support, decisions we make on whom to ignore.

I wonder about the lonely process to intentionally separate  
from those we’ve known and cared for intimately.

I wonder about the reverberations on our kinfolks and children and parents,  
and how we can hold them all in a loving embrace,  
like God holds us, every day, every time, everywhere.

I wonder about the questions we ask in the dark,  
like *Why me? Why him? Her? Them?*  
*What, if anything, could I have done differently?*  
*What did I do wrong?*  
*Why did I get do dang-blasted wronged?*

I wonder about the souls we meet in the everyday,  
folks who carry the ache, angst, and anger  
of broken promises, lost dreams, damaged friendships,  
and disappointments that litter the floor around us.

I wonder about how God expects us to receive hope  
in the midst of trauma and tough times.

I wonder if hope, like Living Water,  
seeps in through the cracks and crevices of our lives and relationships.

I wonder about what the Church of Jesus Christ  
--called to embody love and compassion--needs to say.

### ***What Does the Church Need to Say?***

What has the church been saying?

A study of what the church preached against in the 1960's  
listed the top four subjects labelled as sin:

Divorce, Gambling, Alcohol, & Birth Control.

Well, the Church changed its tune

when divorce rates hit 50%, the lottery got legalized, alcohol became a norm,  
and birth control enabled a sexual revolution.

The same study identified what churches preached against in the 1990's  
—30 years later—as top subjects labeled as sin:

Abortion and Homosexuality.

*My Lord and my God.*

But the damage of harmful preaching and teaching was done, too well done,  
effectively making divorced couples and their families feel less than:  
less than accepted, less than worthy, less than welcome.

Maybe the Church should stop haranguing and start healing.

Maybe the Church could be a home for the hurting, a hospital for the wounded,  
and, if and when sin needs to be identified and pointed out,  
offer less sanctimonious platitudes and more shalom attitudes.

Reminds me of the couple who were lifelong friends for 50 years, yet never married.  
They died at the same time and went up to heaven.

At the Pearly Gate they asked St. Peter to marry them.

St. Peter told them that since they had an eternity,  
please come back to him in 50 years.

50 years later they returned to St. Peter and asked could they get married.

St. Peter said, *“Truth is, you may have to come back in another 50 years.  
I’ve been waiting all this time for a preacher to make it to heaven.”*

### ***What Does the Church Need to Say?***

We say that we will not take sides.

We proclaim that we will not condemn.

We promise we will not pile on the shame.

Our brothers and sisters feel so much shame,

so much embarrassment,  
as if they are less than, unworthy.  
Let the church say aloud as a way of reminding folks  
that in Christ we are born again and made new, again and again,  
to rise up into new beings.

We will provide safe space in our congregation and in our hearts.

Lord knows, folks whose relationships crumbled need safety, not shame.

We will be kind, for we do not know the burdens people bear.

No matter what gossip you've listened to,  
you don't know everything that goes on in other people's homes.  
Guaranteed.

***What Does the Church Needs to Be and Share?***

We declare our intent to raise one another to a higher plane  
to experience authentic, unconditional love.

As we live into this calling,  
folks driving down these city streets  
see our roadside sign and know our purpose:

**HURTING & HEALING HEARTS  
COLLECTED BY  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR  
JESUS CHRIST...CHURCH**

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*