

“When Promises Are Broken”

Sermon by Reverend James Brassard

Scripture: Mark 10:2-16 Jesus is asked about divorce and remarriage
given at Christian Community Presbyterian Church on
October 15, 2006

<http://ccpc.bowiemd.org/sermons.htm>

The last time I preached on this passage in Mark's gospel was thirteen years ago. It is rare that pastors would remember when they preached about a particular passage or topic. The reason is not early memory problems but the nature of preaching every week. My old preaching professor Don McLeod warned that Sundays come at you fast and furiously. There is a relentless quality about them. He used the analogy of driving down the old highways past telephone poles. As soon as one passes, the next one is coming at you. I identify with the closing credits of each episode of Stephen Cannell's television series---a man sitting at a typewriter, who finishes typing and rips it off the rollers and tosses out yet another program (sermon).

I remember it because of the occasion. I was announcing my engagement to Andrea. I was divorced (my congregation had been wonderfully kind to me during that awful period of separation and working out living arrangements for my four children) and I was getting remarried. Andrea was not present that day ---she was still an elder at another church.

Although divorce was **far too common** in my congregation, and remarriage was no longer rare --I felt like it was a “**teachable moment.**” I was known for someone who took the Bible seriously. Since Jesus had spoken so forcefully on the topic—I thought what the heck...deal with a **tough topic to demonstrate how difficult** it was to follow what God intends for us, and to **reiterate that God loves us** and promises that something good can even come out of broken promises and shattered lives.

This past Monday I checked my old sermon notes. I said **nothing controversial in that sermon.** As usual with tough topics, I was very careful with my words. I followed **Preaching rule of thumb #1**—when in doubt... follow what the Bible teaches. As I will share later, I forgot **Rule #2**...When the Bible teaches something people don't want to hear---they shoot the messenger. The preacher is the messenger.

My sermon had three points . . . and it followed the Bible . . .

1. Jesus wanted to uphold marriage in a culture where some married men were callously discarding one wife to take another---sometimes with flimsy excuses.

The text used to justify divorce in Jesus' day was from Moses' day. Deuteronomy 24:1, which says, “*suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce.*”

The rabbis had hotly debated just what might be meant by “**something objectionable.**” Some believed that the objection ought to only be for infidelity. (The **Apostle Paul's position.**) (In Moses' day, adultery was punishable by stoning—something the Taliban reconstituted and carried out during halftime at the weekly soccer matches). Other rabbis were open to divorce on the grounds that we might consider rather **trivial** today.

I hope you saw both productions of “INTO THE WOODS.”

In the senior production we get a modern day glimpse of how the fairy tales **might have ended**. The newly married Cinderella is already having second doubts about having married her Prince. She feels out of place in a palace and wonders if she made a mistake. A while later her Prince, now husband, goes beyond second doubts and kisses the beautiful wife of the Baker. The Baker's wife, soon to be a first time mother, is already looking for a Prince to rescue her from her dull existence.

Composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim is no doubt offering his own satire of the real state of marriage in America where the promise, “**till death do us part** . . . is as unrealistic as the fairy tale ending, “**and they all lived happily ever after.**”

My second point—also consistent with the text-- is that **Jesus was trying protect the most vulnerable members of their society.**

The section in Mark that follows this is where some parents had begun to bring their children into Jesus' midst so that he might touch and bless them. The disciples hastily—maybe nastily - rebuked them—chasing both parents and children away. They considered children to be outsiders who should not be allowed within the family of disciples.

Jesus' response was immediate and stern. He barked at the disciples, “Let the children come to me, do not stop them.” ...he goes further...declaring that children belong in the kingdom of God. Jesus takes the children into his arms—enveloping them with his whole being.

In Jesus' time **women rarely owned property**. Marriage meant a guarantee of support for women and children. Without the protection of the laws against divorce, women were totally at the mercy of their husbands and fathers. In criticizing those who advocated easy divorce, Jesus places himself clearly on the side of those who are weak and vulnerable.

Still, in the overwhelming majority of cases, (80%) women are much worse off after divorce. Studies show that three years after a divorce is final---the men are doing better financially, and the women are doing worse. What makes that significant is that the women usually have the financial and physical responsibility for the children. The greatest concentration of poverty in this country is among single women who have responsibility for children.

Jesus was standing up for the most vulnerable in society and challenging the worst cases of “**men behaving badly.**”

After using the first two points upholding the value of marriage and affirming Jesus love and care of children, I introduced the “**grace notes**” **also found in the story.**

Once again---the message presented is a starkly contemporary one.

In Mark the Pharisees were seeking to trap Jesus when they asked him, “**Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?**” The setup reminds us of all the other situations in which people tried to trap Jesus---on occasions when they demanded signs, inquired about paying taxes or Caesar or debated the resurrection.

Like today's debate about same sex marriage—the Pharisees were not looking for serious dialog about the state of marriage and families in Israel—they wanted to **score some political points**. They were not seeking wisdom out of spiritual concern for the hurting people whose lives were torn asunder by separation and betrayal---they wanted him to support their partisan political agenda.

Like the other questions, the one on divorce was particularly risky. If Jesus appeared to approve of divorce he would appear less than prophetic . . . as John Calvin says, as “*a panderer who lends countenance to human lust.*” In contemporary terms---he would be charged with **opposing family values**.

But... if he spoke against divorce he would risk death. Remember that the brutal King Herod had recently beheaded John the Baptist, the last prophet to have spoken out against his marriage to the ex-wife of his brother.

As was often the case, Jesus was in a tight spot. Yet Jesus is both brilliant and compassionate in his **response** to these self-righteous phonies.

Once again he used the well known rabbinical tactics of answering a question by asking one of his own. He asked the Pharisees to **state the law?** Yes they said, **divorce is legal.** Then Jesus took a sharp turn into a discussion of **God's intention for human relationship**---which is life long marriage. God wants us to have lasting and life giving relationships. Jesus moves the discussion out of the legal context into the spiritual arena.

God does not want us to go around singing *Into The Woods'* show-stopping song—sung by the two Princes:

“Agony—it cuts like a knife.”

Why do we marry?

Jesus points to the story of Adam and Eve. Theirs is the groundbreaking **test marriage**. We used to always read Genesis 1:25-31 at all wedding ceremonies. God notices that Adam is puttering aimlessly about the Garden of Eden and says to Adam, “**it is not good that humans be alone.**” “I will find a perfect mate for you.”

This is a very modern stereotype--- **Men need help**---they are clueless without their mothers or wives taking care of them.

My close college friend is Gil Tutone. I served as best man at his wedding . . .25 years ago. Before deciding to get married to a lovely women, and they are still married 25 years later, he asked, “*Is she right for me?*” I advised him, “*Gil, she is everything you are not. Bright, focused, driven, disciplined. You are a charming, very good looking and young guy---to pass on this gem of a woman is something only a far greater fool than you would do.*”

The new wedding liturgy takes us beyond Genesis. Marriage is more than an answer for loneliness and more than a vehicle for perpetuating the human race.

Marriage is to be a **TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE FOR TWO INDIVIDUALS**. In Christian marriage, God intends **not only to alleviate human loneliness** but to **affect human salvation**.

Marriage is calling us to a higher good in life.

It is a partnership where we help one another become more authentically human and to form a union that enables each of us to serve God more faithfully.

I like the service's closing charge to the couple . . . *"Create a home where no one is a stranger."*

What Jesus says here is **not an all inclusive**, once and for all word about divorce and remarriage. It is a response to **critics out to trip him up**.

Jesus does not condemn divorced persons. Jesus acknowledges that we live in a broken world where people make and break promises---and where people have promises broken by other people that cause them deep hurt.

Jesus here, as always, is clearly on the side of those who are hurt by such human chaos.

Remarriage can be a great gift to people who have suffered long and painful relationships.

Finally, the real reason I remember the sermon—was the response. At the time I announced by engagement, very few people knew Andrea. When I announced my engagement---a couple of single women left the church never to be seen again. There was a tragedy there---one of the women was the **ringer of all ringers on the church softball team. The previous summer we had made the finals—she had left and gone on a cruise and we lost the title game. To put it in football terms—she was as important as Donovan McNabb and Steve McNair are to their teams. With her we were a top-flight outfit—without her we were in the middle of the pack.** It was a big loss!

Another equally memorable reaction was unexpected. It relates to **Preaching Rule #2**—when you use a Bible passage that makes people mad---better duck! Some very close friends in the church who had been so kind and supportive of me during the horrible ordeal of the divorce . . . were fuming!

One suggested that my sermon “made divorced people look like cowards.” Others added just as emphatically, “Anyone who says that divorce is too easy ---or is not painful---is either oblivious or cruel.”

“You wouldn't wish divorce on your worst enemy.”

These supporters—some of whom had gone through painful divorces and were for many years happily remarried---were disgusted.

“James, why do you have to **beat us divorced folks up again!** Haven't we suffered enough! We lost many good friends. We were shunned by some members of the church—it was awful. We came back to this church because you welcomed us and never held our past against us. Now you are reading the strongest and most negative text in the whole Bible where Jesus says those that remarry are committing adultery. We take back all those nice things we said about your preaching.”

They might have had a point. Divorce is horrible. It changes those who suffer through it. It changed me —and not always in good way. I'm **far more combative** and argumentative than I used to be. This hasn't always served me well. Ask the Roto-Rooter guys. It has made me more understanding of how difficult life can be . . . I have greater sensitivity and I am a far better listener. It also changed me in that I can hear criticism without being defensive and I am more aware of my own sinfulness. Yes—I can be self righteous, —angry and impatient.

I disagree with those friends who were angry in that I do find some good news here.

If you have been hurt through divorce, then today's gospel is good news in that, from the beginning, divorce was not what God intended. If you have hurt someone through divorce, then today's lesson is a good time to be reminded that Jesus came into the world to save us, to forgive us, and to offer gracious means whereby we can pick up and start over.

My own divorce and remarriage has changed my understanding of the role of the church in dealing with divorce.

If those Pharisees really cared about their people they would have asked Jesus another question. **How can the church help people who are married and assist those who are divorced?**

Here are two ways we can help:

1. The church can help couples better prepare themselves for marriage.
I have friends who will not perform marriages if one or both of the persons have been divorced.

I just ask that they spend some time learning more about themselves and each other.

They need to learn that all couples argue and fight—they need to learn to do so fairly.

Things that bring us together---are the same things that can push us apart.

Marriage is a journey to awareness---if you are both committed to examine why we react to things as we do—notice how much are behaviors are unconsciously driven by our upbringing—you can create a relationship that can bless you in ways no other relationship can.

A strong marriage is worth fighting for. The success of one's marriage is one of the best indicators of personal well being. Married people drink and smoke less (you know I love smoking statistics), live longer and earn more. One researcher said that being divorced and a nonsmoker is slightly less dangerous than smoking a pack a day and staying married.

Andrea works with a group called “Tobacco Free Nurses.” She is the greatest gift in my life---even if she insists I change the way I have always pronounced my last name.

2. Church should be a place where we walk alongside with the divorced, the hurting, and those whose marriages are on the rocks.

Roxanne Johnson started a Divorce Recovery Group that is doing very well.

It is a great gift to many people in this church. Discover who they really are---those healing from the rough edges caused by divorce---struggling to believe in themselves and to trust God with their future. Jesus reminds us that God is more concerned with your present and future than your past.

If you find that you are also mad about this sermon—pick a copy up in the Narthex—and feel free to send me some nasty e-mails! We may both learn something new!