

A meditation on limits in light of Mark 10:2-16

As a pastor, there are times that you read the Scripture texts for the upcoming Sunday and suddenly wish that you were on vacation. I mean, this week, I even had an “opt out” option w/Mary Mortenson of Prison Congregations of America offering to preach! Alas, I did not take the “opt out” option and here I am, stuck staring at what’s not-so-lovingly called “the divorce text.”

The easy way out would be to ignore it completely and focus on one of our other Scripture options for the day. I mean, we do have a tendency to focus mostly on our gospel texts, so why don’t we spend some time this morning with one of our other passages? But to do so would still leave the elephant in the room – the pain of divorce.

Obviously, the debate over divorce isn’t new. Even in Jesus time, the topic was being debated. The Pharisees ask Jesus the question, “Is divorce lawful?” And yet, they already know what the law says. The law does allow divorce, so that’s not really what they are asking. And yet, Jesus speaks of the limits of the law and in some ways what it is addressing – it is a sin; it’s not divorce that’s not prohibited, but the use of divorce in order to be able to marry again. Now, I’m sure this comment has left many of you feeling uncomfortable as you squirm in your seats because you have dealt with divorce or are currently in the midst of the pain of divorce in your families and may even be in a second marriage.

The reality is that the theological perspective of divorce is not debating the ethics of it – whether it’s right or wrong. Jesus isn’t saying that because it’s wrong it’s not going to, or shouldn’t happen – that’s not the point! What we are left with is the question: So now what? Now that we know divorce is a reality that has been around for 2,000 years, what do we do? Clearly it is labeled as sinful for the very reason that it leaves behind broken relationships. Now, what do we do with the brokenness and the hurt that remains since even Jesus assumes that divorce IS a reality?

Divorce changes everything – it changes the identities of all those involved because suddenly, things are different. It no longer becomes a question of “how do WE get through this?” but “how do I get through this and how do YOU get through this?” It also brings about the question of how to take care of the most vulnerable in the divorce, which usually means the care of children and how to protect them and help them move beyond the divorce into the new reality of a different relationship. What divorce does is leave behind LOTS of questions. Part of what the church community is here for, as well as the pastor, is to provide you with the ministry of presence and prayer. We are here to walk alongside those in our faith community who find themselves in the brokenness of relationship.

One thing that divorce makes clear is that we have limits! We sometimes make promises to one another that we cannot keep (even with the best of intentions). And sometimes those promises are ones that we shouldn't keep when a toxic relationship only gets worse. Divorce is the clear reality that we are a broken, dysfunctional and sinful people and that relationships among two people can fall apart. There's a reason that *Leave It to Beaver* was only a fictional TV show! We may have an ideal of what family is, but then there's always reality.

We have limits.

Despite the limits that we have in our own relationships, we know that there are no limits to God's love for us! For many, that comes across loud and clear through the pain of divorce. Knowing that God can forgive the brokenness of our dysfunctional lives is the only way many people can forgive an ex, or themselves, to try again in relationship as well as love and protect a child.

It's interesting that as dysfunctional as family can be, a lot of times that's the image that we use for the church, for our congregation – we call ourselves family. I think that there's a good reason for that—just like family is not perfect, neither was the church made to be perfect. Oh, it would make it easier if it was perfect, but when was the last time that you agreed 100% with a spouse? A parent? So why should you think you have to agree with your pastor or denomination 100% of the time?

Despite all our good intentions, at times, we as a church hurt one another as well. Despite all our good intentions, there will be times when people leave because of fights, hurts and things that cannot be forgotten. But it's not that they leave those problems behind when they "break-up" with a church. We have a friend that's very cynical about organized churches and thinks he knows what being a Christian is truly about. He's gone from one denomination to the next. He even tried to become a pastor at one point. He has even tried his share of house churches, but there always seems to be something wrong with them as time goes on. I get frustrated when I read his blog because he's always picking something apart when it comes to faith communities and I wonder if he'll ever be happy. I think the problem is that he can't get past that "honeymoon stage" where everything is great. There comes a time in all relationships where things change and things can get hard – where you have to work on things. In some relationships, yes, there even comes a time when they must end. But, in the life of a church, where we KNOW that we are all about dysfunction and imperfection, we have to know that when we leave one faith community, we take that with us and it will only show its ugly head in the next place. Oh, maybe not in the same way, but it will still be there because as humans, our relationships have their limitations. It's because of our brokenness that even our church

communities, our faith families, have to work beyond our brokenness and into the light of hope and possibility in Christ.

I've heard family and friends, who have found themselves on the other side of divorce say that what brought them through it and what helped them survive was the ideas of hope and possibility. Never have I heard anyone mention that they were still looking for perfection.

We continue on because we have hope and possibility in a God whose love has no limits – whose forgiveness constantly reaches through the brokenness of our own relationships and expectations and offers us a new way to think about one another – not just to see each other as sinful and dysfunctional people, but as forgiven children who are wrapped in the arms of a God who offers blessings for all who come to Him.

Helpful Resources

- 1) WorkingPreacher.org
- 2) Christine R. Bartholomew's reflections on the lectionary as written in *The Christian Century*

Not Helpful Resources (Ha! Ha!)

- 1) The "brilliant" sermon I preached on this text 3 years ago that I couldn't find and wanted to since I was sick all week. Oh well.