

JUNE 5, 2022

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON May 29, Sermon on the Mount Part 4, Matthew 5:31-37

This week is a difficult one. We continue with the Sermon on the Mount. The subject matter is very close to home for me. To point out the elephant in the room, we are looking at Jesus' comments on divorce. I myself am going through that very experience, in fact it was recently finalized. Given Jesus' teaching here, and that in my instance adultery was not part of the equation, I hope that my take on this is faithful.

In fact, the only thing I can do to be true and hold any personal integrity given the circumstances is to walk through how I've personally wrestled with the faithfulness and Biblical grounding of all of this to be at peace with my decision. I hope where you may disagree that grace will make up the difference. I hope that this will give you food for thought. So far as I know, most every one of us has some experience of divorce if not personally then through someone we know and often love.

The first thing we have to acknowledge is that Jesus is pretty specific giving only one reason for divorce, which is adultery or sexual immorality. Yet Christians all over the world have other reasons to divorce that seem in their estimation to be legitimate despite this narrow expectation. For me, as with all scripture, we take this in the context of the verses surrounding it, the chapter, the book, the Testament, and the overall Bible.

We must acknowledge that this command is bound in the context of a time and culture. Note the language. The MAN gives the certificate of divorce. There is no sense that the woman has any say. The woman can't file for divorce against the man. It is entirely male centric. There is a reason for this.

Jesus is addressing this not just in the confines of a time and era, but also in the confines of Judaism. Remember, He's speaking directly to Jews and helping the grasp the intention of the Law. Women and children were property. They didn't have say or sway. So if property was going to be dismissed, it was the man and the man alone.

The issue of property also helps us understand why Jesus dials in on this one issue, adultery. Note He doesn't talk about abuse, neglect, abandonment, nothing. Property can be done with as one pleases. But property is critical in this equation.

When a woman had relations with another man, the husband's property is defiled. Not only that, but if a child is conceived, the one who fathers it lays claim to the property, the child. So we have a harsh mix of who's property is what. So if a woman is divorced for any other reason, she is still technically the property of the husband. She becomes the victim of adultery is she remarries because nothing has been done to separate the property issue. The man who marries her also commits adultery because he is technically defiling another man's property.

This is front and center in the nativity story when we see the expectation on Joseph is to break off the marriage with Mary because she's pregnant. As much as we might want to think this is about the relationship (and it may be that as well), it's really more about property. By marrying Mary, Joseph is assuming another man's property, the child. Even though we know the rest of the story, to the people around them, this was a scandal.

We don't share these sensibilities today. We have a much more equal sense of who can divorce whom. Women and children aren't property, they are our cherished relations. The context is entirely different. But why does that matter? It matters because we see Paul engage this sense of context in Corinthians where he gives another reason for divorce.

Paul is the one who tells us to not be unequally yoked. Oddly though he provides for couples who are unequally yoked to divorce if the unbeliever wants to walk away. You'd kind of anticipate maybe a "you made your bed now lie in it" thing rather than allowing for a breakup. But context.....context matters.

At Paul's time, Christianity was new, so any new Christians were adult converts. At the time they got married they likely that preached the Sermon on the Mount in context, with purpose, and desiring the best for both me and you.

WERE equally yoked. Jew with Jew, Gentile with Gentile. But if one converts and the other does not, now there is friction in the marriage. Peace no longer resides in the home. If the unbeliever wants to walk away, Paul gives the Christian license to allow it and move on with their life. It's a very different time and context than when Jesus was teaching about the letter of the Law.

So Paul adjusts.

Cut to today where we have, I think, a better understanding of relationship. The most common example cited is physical abuse. Is that within the context of faithful marriage? Of course not. The vast majority of people, Christians included, if asked what they would advise their child if they were in an abusive relationship that wasn't improving and could perhaps escalate to lethal to divorce and move on. I don't disagree. Because context matters. So does promise, relationship, safety, and genuineness.

This brings us to the passage on oaths. The basic sense here is to not promise something you can't make good on. To make a vow and hold something ridiculous up as collateral makes not faithful sense. For me to make an oath on the "stars" or "moon" is futile. I can't do anything about those things so if my oath fails the consequence isn't even enforceable. Simply be a person of our word. In Tae Kwon Do, the kids say as part of their beginning of class tenet "Integrity: I say what I mean and I mean what I say."

In our marriage vows, there is commitment. In fact, there is part of the traditional liturgy in a wedding that essentially says "If these vows are kept inviolate you will enjoy a happy marriage and life." The converse is true. "If you violate these vows, you'll have a miserable marriage and life."

The vows are about more than adultery. They are so much more and as such do a couple of things. First, they add multiple layers of commitment. They also sadly offer many other avenues that can break a marriage.

Context.

So what do we do with the passage here in Matthew? I offer the following.

Jesus cites Moses in granting the ability to divorce fairly willy nilly. Just write a certificate and it's done. The contrast here is a sense of gravity. Marriage is something to be respected and regarded. It's to be fought for. It's to be laced with grace and gratitude. It's not to be dissolved on a whim. We even have laws in place now to address this. Once divorce is filed, there's a 90 day waiting period before finalization. Why? So that someone doesn't make a decision out of rash emotion that they eventually want to take back because they're not angry anymore. There is wisdom in this.

Yet at the same time, context and circumstance matter.

I don't wish this on my worst enemy. Understand that divorce is ugly, messy, painful, and fraught with all kinds of misunderstandings and such. My pastoral care professor in seminary, Frank Stalfa to whom I am ever indebted, said that there is never a clean break. It's always a tear where both parts walk away with jagged edges. He's right.

But hear this as well.

Given context, sometimes it may be necessary. There may be more situations where the hard fought effort for marriage doesn't meet with adequate return. And when that happens, the inviolate is violated, and the marriage is broken.

To all of this I offer the following. This is my journey, and my understanding. If I am wrong I believe that the grace of God is such that forgiveness is free and offered. I believe that a singular mistake is never the ultimate end. I know that the God that died for me on the cross is the same God that preached the Sermon on the Mount in context, with purpose, and desiring the best for both me and you.