

**Sermon Preached February 16, 2014  
Year A, Epiphany 6 – Matt. 5:21-37 – on divorce  
St. John’s Episcopal Church  
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts  
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Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

There’s a story about a couple who were being interviewed on their Golden Wedding Anniversary. They were asked, “In all that time -- did you ever consider divorce?” “Oh, no, not divorce,” one said. “Murder sometimes, but divorce, no.”

Jesus is preaching his Sermon on the Mount when he says, “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Ouch!

For many of us who are divorced, these are difficult words to hear. Maybe we initiated the divorce and feel guilt and shame for that. Maybe it was done to us against our will and we are hurt and bitter about it. In most cases we feel we have failed in some significant way. The words used in the marriage ceremony can just as easily be used regarding divorce; it “is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly.” Many people, including Jesus, indicate divorce shouldn’t be entered into at all.

If we look at the larger context of Jesus' message in the Sermon on the Mount, he says some pretty strong stuff. He said last week he comes not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it, then this week gives some examples. For instance he notes that in the days of the Old Testament, the days of the Law, we were given the commandment that we shouldn't murder. But then Jesus ups the ante and says that in fact, we shouldn't even be angry with or insult one another. In another example he points out that the Law says we should not commit adultery, but then Jesus takes it one step further and says, we shouldn't even look at someone else with lust.

His commandment about divorce is along the same lines. He notes that the Old Testament Law says it is okay to divorce, but Jesus says it is no longer the case, because if you do, you both will be committing adultery [see also MT 19].

What Jesus' amendments to the Law have in common is that they are about fostering relationship. Sure, we can pat ourselves on the back and say, "I haven't murdered anyone today," and feel self-righteous. The Old Testament Law was established to prevent egregious hurt within the community. The commandments are like the Hippocratic oath, "first, do no harm." As long as everyone is abstaining from murder, you have taken the first step towards the kingdom. But Jesus says that what God ultimately wants from us is much more comprehensive. God doesn't want merely an absence of death, but a giving of life. Fostering relationships. Jesus says he is not making new Laws, but taking the old Laws to their logical conclusion.

He does the same with adultery. We can feel smug that we haven't slept around, but then Jesus points out that we shouldn't even look at someone else. Things like lust and anger and insult are the "thin end of the wedge." They are the first step down the slippery slope. And not only can they bring us to worse vices, but they themselves create a toxic atmosphere between people which is alien to the goals of the Kingdom of God. We can follow the letter of the law and yet completely miss the spirit. The goal of the fulfillment of the law is not checking off boxes, but creating right relationships between people and God, and between people and each other.

Sin is when we treat a part of the creation as less valuable than it really is. It is sinful to murder and commit adultery, but anger, insult and lust also involve treating other human beings as less valuable than they are. They too are sin, yet avoiding them is a tall order! Who can do this? Yes, we can probably all get through life without murder or adultery, but can we make it without anger, insult, or lust? Unlikely. If not, what do we do? Are we doomed to fail?

Marriage, at its best, is where two people see each other as God sees them, and treat each other accordingly. Marriage, when done right, is when two people know that they themselves and their spouse are each beloved by God and worthy of love and respect. It is where the two become one. Each is as precious to the other as their own selves. This can often be the case between married people, yet, if the truth be told, no one can sustain it at all times. We may have a vision on the day of our wedding that everything will be sheer bliss from now on and not an angry word will ever cross our lips, but we all know the reality is different.

Even the closest of couples have arguments and rocky times. In all marriages there is a cycle of “rupture and repair.” Something happens. Sin enters into the relationship through careless actions or words, and there is rupture. But if the basis of the marriage is, as Jesus outlined, a desire to recognize God in each other, there will be repair. This happens through repentance, forgiveness, and mercy. And the marriage is made even stronger and more joyful than before. There are many such wonderful marriages here in our parish!

But now we come to the question of divorce. If God’s goal for us is to live in right relationship with each other. If Jesus’ message is about recognizing the belovedness of all humanity. If marriage is to be a reflection of that right relationship. And if even the best marriages engage in rupture and repair. What happens when there is no repair? What happens when a marriage becomes so broken that we cannot figure out how to fix it? What happens when staying married is so toxic for one or both spouses, that they are being chronically treated as less valuable than they really are? Sometimes one or both spouses engage in an ongoing, sinful, hurtful relationship with each other. Sometimes a marriage can be a chronically sinful state. Then the question becomes, is it less sinful to remain married or to get divorced? Sometimes divorce is the better option. Not a great option, but the better one.

In the gospel today, Jesus speaks of divorce, like anger, insult, and lust, as sins which break the fabric of right relationship. Which means, whether we have divorced or not, we all fall short of the glory of God. As Jesus said last week, we may be the salt of the earth and the light of the world but “unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” [Mt 5:20]. The point is, none of us can do it. We

can't avoid anger, insult and lust. And some of us can't figure out how to heal a chronically sinful marriage, resulting in divorce. And some of us can't avoid some other significant sins. What Jesus asks of us is beyond our capability. And if we think we can only be loved and saved if we avoid sin, then we are destined for failure; destined for hell. Hell is being outside the Kingdom of God, separate from God's love.

That's why the message of the gospel is so powerful! Sure, we strive for perfection, but we can't achieve it. Jesus outlines impossible goals. That is why in the end, we must throw ourselves onto the mercy of God and trust in Her love. We are imperfect, and God says, "yes you are, but I forgive and heal you."

As we say in the Prayer of Humble Access in the Prayer Book, "We do not presume to come... trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies." If we trust only ourselves, we can't make it. So instead we trust God. The love and mercy of God is holding us and all our faults and we don't have to fix it. We only need to try our best, and then hand over our shortcomings to God, and She will make up the difference.

Sure there is still the "ouch." Divorce is a sign that we live in a broken and sinful world. But sometimes it is the less sinful option. I would also suggest that when we divorce we keep in mind Christ's call for right relationship, and to the best of our ability over time to forgive, and perhaps even love our ex's as brothers and sisters in Christ.

But in the end when we divorce, or commit any sin, after we repent and try to make restitution as best as we are able, we must throw ourselves into the arms of God. The Almighty is bigger than any sin. Only in God can we let go and find rest. It is there our sins are washed clean by the healing work of Christ. It is there we are set free from sin and shame and failure, and know we are forgiven and made whole.

Amen.