

WGUMC February 23, 2014 Matthew 5:27-32

Maybe you remember years ago when Joe Kennedy, Bobby's son, wanted to get remarried after his divorce. To do that in the Catholic Church, he had to get his first marriage annulled. So, his ex-wife Sheila received a letter from the Archdiocese of Boston informing her that her ex-husband had filed for an annulment and that, if granted, their 12-year marriage would be declared invalid from the start and their two sons would be considered "children of an unsanctified union." In other words, "illegitimate." Talk about adding insult to injury!

When it comes to organized religion and marriage, sometimes it doesn't seem like we've progressed much in 20 centuries. And some folks would blame the Bible for it.

The truth is that you won't find a marriage manual in Scripture. The Hebrew Bible is full of polygamy. The New Testament promotes celibacy. The two figures who dominate

the New Testament are Jesus and the Apostle Paul, neither of whom ever got married.

Paul, in particular, didn't think much of marriage. After all, the world was about to end, and he wanted the faithful to save their strength for martyrdom, not marriage! Of course, if you just can't control yourself, go ahead and get hitched. Better to marry than to burn! Read all about it in I Corinthians 7.

Paul's advice to the Christians in Corinth sounds pretty strange to us here in California. There's just no getting around the fact that the Bible doesn't say what we want it to say about marriage these days. And that is especially true of two painful passages in the Sermon on the Mount today. But what I want us to do is to listen for a word of grace in what sounds like judgment, a word of compassion where we would otherwise hear condemnation.

I could preach a whole sermon on what Jesus has to say about adultery. In fact, I have. But today I'm going to focus on

what Jesus says about divorce, because down through the ages, so many Christians have suffered so much over these verses.

First of all, there's no way to understand what Jesus is saying without knowing something about the context in which he is saying it. In these verses, Jesus is diving into a debate that had been going on for a long time. The Book of Deuteronomy says that a man can divorce his wife if he finds something objectionable about her. [Deuteronomy 24:1-4] But different schools of thought developed around what qualified as "objectionable." Rabbi Shammai taught that the only sufficient grounds for divorce was sexual immorality. But Rabbi Hillel taught that it was enough of a reason if the wife were a lousy cook. As you can see, in this debate, Jesus sides with the more conservative Rabbi Shammai.

This ancient rabbinical debate seems pretty divorced from the reality and complexity of marriage today. And that makes it

hard for us to hear what Jesus has to say. But I want to argue that what sounds harsh and insensitive to us sounded a lot more kind and compassionate in Jesus' day.

Think for a moment about the status of women in ancient Palestine. Women were literally the property of their fathers or husbands, as were the children and cattle. They could not inherit property or testify in court on their own behalf. They could not initiate divorce under any circumstances.

So what was a woman to do if a man simply got tired of her and divorced her? Being rejected by her husband was a huge disgrace and she would try to crawl back to her father's house. But she would be a burden there, another mouth to feed, and he might well refuse to take her in. She could only hope to marry again, but she was damaged goods and what would she live on in the meantime? Begging? Selling herself into slavery or prostitution? For women in that time, there weren't a lot of options.

Jesus knew how vulnerable women were in his world. And I suspect that when he talked about divorce, women heard words of comfort, rather than condemnation. They lived with the constant fear of being forsaken. So, by restricting the rules of divorce, one of the things Jesus was saying to them was: "I don't want you to be abandoned for no good reason."

What would Jesus say today, considering that women are in a very different position? I honestly don't know. I doubt Jesus would be pro-divorce. I don't think anyone is. I'm pretty sure that Jesus would want married couples to work hard to make it work. And he would want their children to come to him [Matthew 19:14] so that he could bless them and tell them that whatever is going on with their parents, it's not their fault. God loves them no matter what. Now it's our job to remind them of that.

In the end, all the rules in the Sermon on the Mount apply to marriage. In our intimate relationships, Jesus wants us to

love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, turn the other cheek, go the second mile, and be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. [Matthew 5:38-48] Jesus sets the bar pretty high for husbands and wives. And if that bar seems impossible for any of us to reach, maybe that's the point.

A few weeks ago, I said that the Sermon on the Mount was about life in the kingdom of God. Jesus is talking about how life should work. This is how believers should live. But most of us are a long way from that kingdom. Married or single, every one of us is messed up. So, the Sermon on the Mount is our reminder of how much we need God's grace.

Saddled as we are with impossible expectations, we want to know whether we still have any hope of salvation. So let me tell where you can find some. Just compare what Jesus *said* about adultery and divorce to what he *did* when he encountered people who were caught up in those situations.

Remember the women caught in the act of adultery? The scribes and Pharisees were going to stone her. But Jesus stopped them in their tracks: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first one to throw the stone at her." When they left, one by one, Jesus asked the woman, "Has no one condemned you?" "No one sir," she replied. "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." [John 8:1-11] Words of compassion, not condemnation.

Again, remember the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus knew that this woman had had five husbands and that the man she was with now was not her husband. But that was no deal-breaker. Jesus offered this broken-hearted woman a drink of living water, the gift of eternal life. [John 4:1-26]

So, as I see it, we can't ignore the fact that, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us rules and those rules mark the boundaries of the blessed life. But neither should we

forget the fact that in his ministry, he offered plenty of grace to those who had been broken by those same rules.

I thought of Jesus when I read about an Orthodox rabbi in *The New York Times* this week. Author Tova Mirvis had been raised an Orthodox Jew and married an Orthodox Jew. But as Tova grew and matured, she didn't wear the old rules very well. Something happened. She writes, "...it was hard, impossible really, to explain what went wrong, how in my marriage I eventually felt like the street performers I'd once seen, who fold themselves inside impossibly small boxes, contorting arms over legs, so that a body occupies such little space."

Tova decided that she couldn't live in that little box anymore, so there she stood before the rabbis who read the official divorce document to her in Aramaic. It was dated the year 5772, counting from the Orthodox date of the creation of the world. The document was then dropped into her hands. She



performed the prescribed ritual motions, turned and walked from the room.

When she was called back before the panel of rabbis, she was given new rules for how to live as a divorced woman. And this is how she describes what happened next:

Before I left, the head of the rabbinical court looked me in the eye. I met his gaze, steeling myself for judgment and rebuke. Instead, he told me a story:

The temple altar, the Talmud says, weeps when a man divorces his wife. When a revered rabbi got divorced, his students came to him and asked: "How can this be? Does our tradition not teach that the altar weeps over a divorce?"

The rabbi looked at his students. "Better the altar should weep than should I."

All these rigid rules, all these unyielding laws. Yet here, too, was the recognition of human pain, here, too was acceptance of human experience. It was this wisdom from my tradition that I wanted to hold onto, even as I left so much behind.

"It's a new beginning," the rabbi told me, kindly. "Don't look back. Go forth, become the person you need to be."

I smiled, nodded. Before I left, as they did at the end of my wedding, as they did at the conclusion of the divorce ceremonies hundreds of years ago, the rabbis wished me a *mazel tov*. [Tova Mirvis, *The New York Times*, February 19, 2014]

Rabbi Jesus speaks to us a word of grace. I hope you can hear it. Let us pray:

Divine Lover, how great is your faithfulness and how wonderful are your promises. For you have made a solemn vow to have and to hold us, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, loving and cherishing us from this day to all eternity. In our lives and especially in our marriages, Lord, help us to know that your faithfulness will cover our infidelities, your grace will mend our brokenness, and your love can heal all the hate and the hurt we bury so deeply within us. In this moment, we hold in the light of your redeeming power, all our successes and our failures at loving others, including our intimate partners. And if our sworn commitment to love, comfort, honor and keep another ever comes to an end, grant us your mercy, Lord. And then, in your good time, give us the faith to believe in you and to begin again. Amen.