

“Divorce and Children”

Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 8, Mark 10:2-16

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 6, 2024, the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to all who have been through divorce – as adults and children, and to the memory of Jim Kyle, Rick Sayre, Dene Barnard, and Lynn Roseberry and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.
Amen.*

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Mark 10:9 says, “*what God has joined together, let no one tear asunder.*” The asundering. To be asundered literally means to be torn in two. And Divorce is a form of asundering. The word “Divorce” itself comes from an old English battle term meaning, “the severing of a limb.” When we are torn in two, we feel the effects. We feel it in our broken hearts. We feel it in the severing of one relationship which causes damage to other relationships.

For the “asundered,” the pain of divorce is often so palpable that it feels like losing an arm or leg – or worse – like a dying of sorts. For others, the asundering experienced in divorce can bring surprising peace – no more fighting, no more difficult daily struggles and interactions, no more pain in the interactions, or no more pain from the complete failure to interact with one another.

To turn away from this text is to deny the asundering in marriage. It happens. From 2024 statistics, 42% all first time marriages end in divorce, 60% of all second marriages end in divorce, 75% of all third marriages end in divorce. So, if you are gambler, you shouldn't get married the third time. In addition, in 40% of all new marriages, one of the two in the marriage has been married before. I also discovered that, among religious people, Hindus have the lowest rate of divorce, and the highest rate of divorce is among Evangelical Protestants.

Statistics aside, we know that when two are torn in two, everyone else is affected in some way, too. In other words, there are “beloved asundered ones” everywhere hurt by divorce – many who never even hear the real reasons it happened. Couples, children, and extended families all feel the effects of being torn asunder.

Just as Jesus has a lot to say about divorce in Mark 10, it will not surprise you that the Bible has plenty to say about divorce, too. Quite frankly, most of it is really hard to hear. From Genesis 2 as God creates Eve for Adam, running throughout the scriptures, our God, who creates us to come together, clearly has no idea what to do when people are separated and divorced. God is lost in this. In fact, in the eyes of God, the separation and divorce of couples is viewed as inconceivable – as well as unacceptable. This theme runs throughout the Biblical texts along with counter themes that keep coming into relationships – themes of trauma, infidelity, and abuse that keep crashing into this story – in which cases for divorce can be made in those situations. This cross current sets up the deep and important questions about the sanctity and sacredness of marriage, but it also sets up the effects of trauma inside marriage and in human relationships in general.

Divorce arrives as Levitical and Deuteronomic law codes very early. Later, at least four prophets – Malachi, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Isaiah all weigh in. Jesus and the Apostle Paul don't lighten the load in the New Testament either – as has been pointed out in Mark 10 today. So for those who have encountered divorce in your lives or in your family's life, everybody has an opinion.

Everybody has to put in their two cents in the Bible. Everybody feels like they are experts on divorce. Does this sound like your personal experiences with divorce? Everybody feels they must weigh in. Everybody feels like they need to give you their two cents because what would you do without it? And your answer is – “Actually, I will be fine without your opinion.”

Like other parts of our life stories which scripture informs and sometimes crashes in the way we are living, we must find ways to extol the fullness of God’s love in marriage, in divorce and then beyond marriage.

After all, marriage was made for humans, not humans for the marriage. So when marriage fails to enhance and further the total well-being of the humans involved – when it causes intense hurt and constant pain – it must change or end.

Sadly, the torn asundering that happens IN marriage informs the decisions around divorce – and those experiences are never addressed in scripture and almost never addressed by the church. The church sucks at dealing with divorce. We stink at this. The church has failed so many of you in so many ways because we don’t know what to do with God’s not knowing what to do. So, we mess up lives by all that we dump on you in all that you are already going through.

We need to acknowledge that the continuance of legal marital bonds is not always good if the nurture, happiness, the design of God’s plan for you to be fully human is lost in that relationship.

Admittedly, the depth of these questions cannot and should not be handled in a sermon. Trying to do it here, is not fair. Jesus is the one who opened this can of worms, and I can’t just close it without saying a few more words. I do need to say that the Church has remained silent about divorce. Too often we have been the ostrich with our head buried in the sand. Or we have made sweeping pronouncements and created divisive rules that deepen the pain that is already present – which is how our passage deals with divorce today. I will say this – to the United Church of Christ – in 1995

our Book of Worship was the first book published anywhere in the history of Christendom that offered a liturgy and prayers for peace at the time of divorce.

In the ways in which the church has not been helpful to you and your families, I am truly sorry for your pain. Please hear me when I add – and this is very important – that if through the struggles of separation and divorce, that you have experienced in my 25 years here, I have not been helpful, I apologize and ask your forgiveness.

The reality of being “torn asunder” claims more room in our lives and in Judea-Christian scriptures than can be captured in a brief reflection on divorce. As I have looked more closely at “*Asunder*,” this word occurs 22 times in the King James Version of the Bible: 13 in Hebrew Scriptures and 9 in the Christian Scriptures. It is found in combination with break (twice), burst, cleave (twice), depart, cut (six times), divide (three times), drive, part, pluck-up (twice), rend, saw. These are the translation of 9 Hebrew, and 4 Greek words. It always relates to severing and almost always relates to harsh and violent separation.

The truth is – in scripture and in life – for one person to be torn asunder always hurts others. It hits everyone in spiritual, emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical ways that are not easy to mend and not easy to heal.

The asundered can be seen in divorce, but let’s be honest – our world is filled with too many “asundering” stories that have nothing to do with divorce. We see torn asunder stories in war (reference George Ferzli’s family in Lebanon). We are torn asunder by violent assaults, by neglect and too many forms of abuse. None of us simply walk away from asundered experiences without having been changed.

I don’t know about you, but I can’t recall a time in my life as a citizen in our great nation when I have felt, on a daily basis, more tearing at the fabric of who we are and what we believe than I have in the past eight years.

When it hits, it can be paralyzing. You might find yourself unable to move forward. You might not be able to find unity and to heal as an individual. You might see our nation on full throttle social media-fied ways of amplifying of communication that is concentrated in the hands of a few who seek to divide and separate people for the dollar they can make off of it. In spite of all this, we are called to be different. We are called to move forward. We are called by Jesus and the values we hold in our sacred texts of scripture and our nation's central documents which set forth our binding values to unify – not to divide. We are called to bridge differences, and we are called not to tear asunder anymore. Civility cannot be a word we simply use in past tense. Civility must guide each of our present steps into a brighter future.

Perhaps there is no better place to bind the brokenness than in the final verses of today's passage – Mark 10:14-16 – which come as a strange addition to this. Let's face it. Jesus and the disciples have gone into a house, they ask him some more questions about divorce, and it doesn't get better. And all of a sudden there is a knock on the door. One of the disciples answers and looks at Jesus and they say, "it's those kids. They are at the front door. They are coming to bug you – again." The disciples turn to the kids and say, "you get out of here." Jesus angrily interjects to the disciples, "you get out of here." Jesus welcomes the children.

It's the children who show us the move from the tears of asundering into the hope of a bright today and a bright tomorrow. After presenting all these hard texts, Jesus says, "come on in kids." He says to the disciples, "you go to the edges. They are coming to the center." He gets down on the floor with them and he starts listening to them. They are telling him all the stories of their lives. They are telling him what they learned from his teachings. He is not there to teach them so much as he is there to learn from them. It turns out being a healing and blessing for everyone involved. Jesus knows they have all just heard all his tough stuff about divorce. He knows that the children always suffer the secondary effects of the pain of the asundering. So he wants to be with them now.

The Lord of Life, the Messiah of the world sits down on the ground and hangs out with the kids. He blesses them and offers them the best of who he is. While, those who are asundered stand around broken and forlorn, Jesus is with the children – showing them what it looks like to be humble, to get down on your knees and to be caught up in meaningful moments with little ones. It is a spirit of unity in the face of divisions; it is a spirit of binding that brings together broken relationships. It is the spirit of healing the fissures of family and the world to bring everyone together.

In this same spirit, Jesus calls his whole church together to his table of grace today on this 91st World Communion Sunday. In 1933, while Hitler was rising to dictatorial power in Germany and the world was latching on to one dangerous dictator after another as the human family was struggling to get back on its feet from the malaise of the great Depression, one man had a vision. His name was Rev. Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr, Senior Minister of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, PA. He called the Church Universal to come together each year on the first Sunday of October to join at Christ's table. Do you know how hard that was to do back then? There was no internet, no social media. He literally wrote a letter to the world and said, "let's get to Christ's table of love and grace." He believed that the church should get together and show unity in Christ. It was Dr. Kerr's gift to the world! Thanks be to God for the Presbyterians, Rev. Miller.

It started slowly but Dr. Kerr stuck with it. During WWII, World Communion Sunday finally caught on. And do you know who made it catch on? The soldiers on both sides of the war. They believed they could come to the table one Sunday a year to be siblings at the table of grace. It was the troops who crossed the lines in Europe to bring together in this symbol of unity in the midst of war. That is why we have this today. We can never take this for granted.

The Apostle Paul tells us that we are to "discern the body" when we partake of Holy Communion, mindful that we note our relationship to all in Christ's communion and celebration.

In the asundering days in which we live, I pray that we find a way to healing and wholeness. May we become like little children and approach our Savior's table with delight and joy. May we, like Dr. Kerr, believe that this table becomes the place that the whole world comes for healing, that this table becomes the place that hope is born again.

My sisters and brothers, we need to overcome and heal from any and all asundering in our lives. Let's begin now – at God's table of grace. Let's come to the table just as we are. Let's come open to healing. Let's come and receive the love and grace of our Savior – right here and right now. Amen.