

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

### "A Hard Line"

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#### **Mark 10:2-16**

*2 Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'<sup>3</sup> He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?'<sup>4</sup> They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.'<sup>5</sup> But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.<sup>6</sup> But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female."<sup>7</sup> "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,<sup>8</sup> and the two shall become one flesh."<sup>9</sup> So they are no longer two, but one flesh.<sup>9</sup> Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'*

*10 Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.<sup>11</sup> He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her;<sup>12</sup> and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'*

*13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.<sup>14</sup> But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.<sup>15</sup> Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'<sup>16</sup> And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.*

A golden anniversary party was held for a couple. The husband was so moved by the occasion that he wanted to tell his wife just how he felt about her. With their many family members and friends gathered around, the husband toasted his wife. "My dear wife, after fifty years I've found you tried and true." Everyone smiled their approval and nodded. But the wife who had difficulty hearing, simply shouted, "What?" The husband repeated his toast louder, "AFTER FIFTY YEARS I'VE FOUND YOU TRIED AND TRUE." His wife then gave him a disturbed glance and shouted back, "Well, let me tell you something. After fifty years I'm tired of you too!"

A Missouri newspaper chronicled a Native American couple who decided to honor their tradition and exchange marriage vows in an authentic Cherokee ceremony. They researched to make certain everything was correct. They even hired a Cherokee medicine man to perform the service. At the end of the service the medicine man gave them a large flat rock and told them to carve their names upon it. The groom was instructed to throw the rock into the river. Then the medicine man, reminding the couple that the water was especially high in that part of the river, said that if they ever wanted to get divorced, they must first find the rock and bring it to him.

On a day long ago, Jesus was cornered by several skeptical opponents. He was asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" In reply, Jesus asked the crowd to recite the Law of Moses. In those days, a man could simply write on a sheet of paper his intent to divorce his wife, even for an offense as minor as burning his toast. She then had to leave the house. The marriage was over.

I tend to avoid preaching on Scripture passages like this. On most days, I am happily married. But my reticence is more serious than that. This lesson is controversial. It is perplexing. It speaks to a painful human experience. But it is the gospel reading assigned to this particular Sunday. I always figure God's hand might be behind that assignment so with great fear and trepidation I pray I will offend no one. I pray you might hear the word of God somewhere in my words. I might not be comfortable but the gospel isn't supposed to make us comfortable all the time. All of us have been touched by divorce, whether directly or within our circle of family and friends. We are well aware of the sadness, anger, and hurt that surrounds the difficult circumstances that come with the end of a marriage.

Some scholars have suggested that Jesus' fierce condemnation of divorce, and specifically remarriage after divorce, was related only to his concern for the vulnerability of women and children. A woman who was dismissed by a writ of divorce had no power. Women of that time and culture were totally at the economic and political mercy of their husbands. This argument makes sense because if anything, Jesus always clearly sided with the weak and the vulnerable. But we simply can't stop there. Jesus strongly affirmed the permanence of marriage vows. "What God has joined together, let man not separate." While these words can cause us to squirm in our seats or make us want to preach on other topics, there is no way to camouflage or sugarcoat these words. It's a hard line.

I think it is important to understand the context of the conversation. It is crucial to realize that the question posed to Jesus that day was not really a serious one. Those who did the asking didn't really care about protecting the sanctity of marriage. They were more interested in trapping Jesus. Their bogus question came from an attitude that sought to gain an advantage and protect their own interest. How can we use the law to justify our selfish behavior and satisfy our own needs and whims? How can we be in covenant with our marriage partners and with our God without committing all that we have to it? How can we reduce our following God to a manageable formula so we really don't have to change anything about ourselves?

These legal scholars of Jesus day were like that author Harold Bloom describes in his recent book *The American Religion*. Bloom claims that we Americans have one predominant faith and that is that God really, really likes us, that God is thrilled with us on any occasion and that God couldn't be happier with our moral progress. We use God to make us feel better about ourselves. Our overwhelming bias is in favor of individual satisfaction and using God to meet our own needs.

But on that day, Jesus wouldn't let his listeners be so shallow. He plunged them into a deeper part of life, where instead of worrying about laws and rules and self interest one had to consider the nature of God. He asked them to focus on what God intended for human beings at creation, and the divine purpose that was behind human relationships. Jesus reminded his listeners that God's act of bringing man and woman together was not to establish authority or status or power. The point was harmony and

caring. The point was that we need each other. The point was that in such a covenant we catch sight of God's love for us and we learn how we are called to look beyond our selfish needs to love each other intimately and seriously. Jesus knew better than to take God's gift of marriage and reduce it to cold, hard, legal facts. He knew that God's will for marriage was a way to foster respect, support, and concern for others.

Jesus took a hard line on divorce. He took the permanence of marriage seriously. But I find comfort and wisdom in knowing that he always spoke beyond the black and white law and to the reality of human relationships. Jesus spoke as a loving teacher, friend, presence of God, and I think most importantly, redeemer of human life. He understood that when our relationships fail, and when we are deeply wounded at the end of something we hoped would last forever, we need to feel something other than sterile legal judgment. He knew that when we face the pain of such brokenness, we need to hear words of grace and love and forgiveness. In whatever context our relationship might be: marriage, family, or parenting- with whatever failure and frustration that might include, we all need to be reminded that we ultimately belong to a bigger home. We all belong to a family where no matter what; we are welcome in our creator's house. We are children of a God who in grace and love has been with us from the first and will be with us forever.

That is what I believe Jesus meant that day. The way to successful relationships is not found in laws or books. It is not found in seeking our own personal needs. It is certainly not found in the judgment of others. It is found in discovering the heart of God, the heart that gives us the gift of each other.