

This gospel text on divorce and remarriage is not my favorite text to preach on, nor is it for most pastors. Some have ingenious ways to avoid it. Some assign it to the associate pastor. Some schedule their vacation to avoid it. Others plan a hymn sing Sunday. My problem was that I didn't look ahead far enough.

Considering the gospel text this morning it would be terribly easy to be drawn into a troubling debate on divorce and remarriage. It isn't as if Jesus is silent on these matters. But the truth is that we don't want to hear what he has to say. Jesus' words against divorce and remarriage seem as unforgiving as any in the Old Testament, and they fly in the face of the experience of many in our company. I don't even have to go outside my immediate family to bring this home. My mother and step-father were both divorced and then married to each other. And so it is with more than academic interest that I confront these words this morning.

I honestly question how much good could come from such a debate, no matter what our conclusions. Should we conclude that these words of Jesus prohibiting divorce and remarriage are to be obeyed without question, I'm not sure any would go home this morning better off than they came. Those who are divorced and now single will go home with a sense of failure in a broken marriage and hopelessness for any future relationship. Those who are divorced and remarried will go home weighed down with guilt and perhaps anger. Those in abusive relationships will leave feeling trapped in hurtful and harmful homes with no escape open. Those who are single, not yet married, may leave here wondering if the blessings of marriage are worth the risk. And those who today are happy and married may go home with an unjustified sense of self-righteousness.

But the prospect of not taking Jesus at his word is equally odious. If Jesus is not against divorce,

if Jesus is indifferent to the breaking of vows made in front of God, then why do we have so many weddings in churches and where is the sanctity of it all? And if Jesus is indifferent to remarriage, what is to stop our disposable consumerism mind set from creeping into our marriages where one spouse is casually tossed aside to be replaced by a new one?

No, I don't believe the good this morning is found in a debate over divorce and remarriage. That's the debate in which the Pharisees intended to entrap Jesus. "Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?". It was the question of "What is permissible in the law?" But Jesus quickly changed the playing field from "What is legally permissible?" to "What was God's intent from the beginning?"

Jesus changed the question from "What is prohibited pertaining to marriage?" to "What is prescribed for marriage?" to which then Jesus answers, "But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Jesus wants his audience to know, and that audience includes you and me, that marriage is a gift of God and that its greatest blessings are realized in a permanent bond.

You may think you've heard the entire "Eve created out of Adam" story, but I came across a little-known piece recently in a Dead Sea Scroll of Genesis that sheds a bit more light on that event.

Not long after God created Adam he talked with Adam about His plans and said, "Adam, it really isn't good for you to live alone; I have some great plans for a suitable companion for you."

Adam was pleased to hear this great news and asked God to tell him more. God said, "Well, it's really a good news - bad news situation. The good news is that this woman I am planning to make for you - once you are married - will worship the ground you walk on. Her whole purpose in life will be to make you happy. Your every wish will be her command. You will never have to work a day in your life.

She will beg to wait on you hand and foot She will rise early in the morning and spend her whole day serving you in every way. You will be forever thankful for her love.

"Now the bad news," God continued, "is that this woman will cost you an arm and a leg."

Adam thought for a moment, and then is reported to have said, "Well, God, what do you have for just one rib?" (Truth be told, Adam got a bargain.)

God did have a plan for a suitable helpmate for Adam, but you know, of course, this wasn't it. When I read this Genesis 2 text for a wedding service I like to add how, I am told, an old Jewish rabbi commented on it.

He said, "God made Eve out of Adam's rib so that she should be beneath his arm for him to protect her, close to his heart for him to love her, and at his side to walk in full equality with her. In the wisdom of God he did not take a bone from Adam's hand lest Adam use her as a tool. He did not take a bone from Adam's foot lest he tread upon her. He did not take a bone from Adam's head lest she try to dominate him. But out of his side a rib was taken that together they might be partners side-by-side for life."

Male and female, man and woman, husband and wife, side-by-side for life...what a plan, what a gift, what a blessing. It is the recognition that it is not good that we should be alone. It is the recognition that life is easier when shared by and supported by another. Now it is true that not every man and every woman will marry. That may be by choice or by chance. Family and friends may be for them the life companions and helpers and support systems otherwise served by a spouse. I am not convinced that a person has to marry to be happy, fulfilled or to have a God-pleasing, God-serving life.

But those who choose to marry need to see in it more than an invention born from human need. It was part of God's plan from the beginning. It is for more than convenience; it is for blessing. God's design is for enduring and enriching marriages. The provision "until death parts us" is not punishment,

not a life sentence to servitude, but intended as a gift for our happiness and well-being.

But I would do you no favor this morning if I send you home with such an exalted image of marriage and ignore the very real hurts and trials that often afflict this relationship. It was God's plan that the union of one man and one woman be permanent, that men and women love, respect, and honor each other, that they might make a home that would stand as protection from the dangers of society and a relationship in which each is nurtured and strengthened for service in the world. That was God's plan. But we know that even though it might be God who joins these two together, these two are still sinful human beings and sin has a way of interfering and just plain wreaking havoc with God's plans. What happens when we as marriage partners fall short of God's intent? Is all lost?

It is interesting that even in our wedding service there is a recognition of this possibility. There is a prayer toward the beginning of the service which infuses a strong dose of reality into a ceremony which is supposed to be about life-long happiness and the pledging of undying love. This prayer dares to say the truth, that in the middle of this dream land of love there may be problems. But then it goes on to promise God's redeeming love which can meet and defeat those problems.

The prayer reads: "The Lord God in his goodness created us male and female, and by the gift of marriage founded human community in a joy that begins now and is brought to perfection in the life to come. Because of sin, our age-old rebellion, the gladness of marriage can be overcast and the gift of the family become a burden. (Well, surprise, surprise! Surprise, though, only to those who have never been married.) But because God, who established marriage, continues still to bless it with his abundant and ever-present support, we can be sustained in our weariness and have our joy restored."

God is in the redemption business. God is in the salvage business. He does not leave you alone in your threatened marriage. He can save those marriages which turn to him, and even bring forgiveness and the promise of new life to those relationships that fail.

Given our sinful nature it is a wonder that any marriages succeed. How is it possible for imperfect people to have lasting marriages? In Thornton Wilder's play *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the character Mrs. Antrobus says to her husband calmly, almost dramatically, "I didn't marry you because you were perfect. I married you because you gave me a promise." She takes off her ring and looks at it. "That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage."

Lasting marriages are built on such promises, promises made in God's name, and promises guided and empowered by his Spirit, Amen.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen,