

All in the Family
Mark 10:1-16
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
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The world is an uncertain place, and it's hard to think about commitment. I mean, really, who wants to get married in the first place, when you look around you and see how sky-high the divorce rate is. More and more young people – women especially – are questioning whether or not marriage is worth the risk.

Friends, I'm not talking about today – I'm talking about the situation in Israel two thousand years ago. In the time of Jesus, divorce was widespread. The people based their practice on a line from the book of Deuteronomy, which reads, "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, he can write her a certificate of divorce." (Deut. 24:1). A man can divorce his wife *if he finds something indecent* about her. How do we interpret that rule?

You see, that's the question that the people were talking about that day when Jesus and the disciples rolled into town. The family was falling apart, people said. What can we do?

Some people, following Rabbi Shammai, said that the only indecency for which divorce was permissible was that of adultery. No matter what else happened, if she was faithful, she was your wife. Rabbi Hillel, however, interpreted the rules quite differently. His followers argued that it was indecent of a woman to cook a meal improperly, or to talk to another man in public, or spoke disrespectfully about a man's relatives. In fact, some religious teachers said that a man could divorce his wife if her voice got on his nerves, or if he found someone who was more attractive than she.

Well, you can guess who had more followers – Hillel seemed to be carrying the day, and divorce was tragically common (although I should point out that this is a man divorcing his wife. The wife, if she wanted a divorce, had to ask her husband to do it). The bottom line is that women were treated like property, and relationships were matters of convenience rather than opportunities for service and obedience.

So when the religious teachers ask Jesus about his views on marriage, they're not just asking an academic question. It's a burning issue. People want to know: whose side are you on, Jesus? Do you think Shammai has it right? Or are you a Hillel fan?

They may have had an ulterior motive as well. Do you remember John the Baptist? What happened to him? He was executed by King Herod. Do you remember why Herod put him to death? Because Herod had divorced his own wife and married his brother's wife. When John challenged him on that, Herod arrested John. When he seemed to be unsure as to what to do next, Herod's step-daughter seduced Herod into killing John. So it may be that when these religious leaders see Jesus coming to town, they want to get him to weigh in

publicly on the issue of marriage in the hopes that they can provoke him into saying something like John did, and then maybe Herod will take care of their Jesus problem, too. In other words, it could be a trap.

But I don't think so. I think that what's happening here is that Jesus chooses to teach his followers an important lesson using one of the "hot topics" of the day. Let's take a look at what happens here.

First, the Pharisees come and pose some questions to Jesus. Listen to the phrases that they used: "Is it lawful..." and "Moses allowed". The tone of their comments seems to indicate that what they are most interested in is that which is permitted. "How far can we go?", they seem to say. "What's the absolute minimum amount of integrity and faithfulness that might be required of us?"

These men, who are charged with teaching the people of God how to live according to the Law of God, have begun to act as though living God's way was like one of those 1-800-SAFE-AUTO commercials. It's like these guys were waying, "We keep you holy for less!" The religious "leaders" here do not seem interested in getting to know the heart of God's intentions for his people – they want to know what a person of faith can reasonably expect to get away with.

Don't we see that in our world today? How often do you find yourself thinking, or run into someone else who seems to be thinking, "how close can I get to really messing things up without actually getting into trouble?" I know, the scripture says that I'm supposed to love my neighbor and give to the poor...but how much do you suppose I'm allowed to keep? What is the bottom line, God? I'm supposed to be kind to others, but how nice do I have to be?

When we read scripture that way, I think of an image where a man is driving a car on an icy road up a steep mountainside where there is no guardrail. With each twist and turn, the man drives closer to the outside shoulder, thinking, "I wonder how close I can get to this edge without actually falling off." It seems to me that a wiser approach would be to stay close to the inside shoulder and say, "I have this good road here – I don't want to jeopardize the end of my journey by driving off the mountain here..."

So these men come to Jesus and ask him for the rock-bottom interpretation. "What's the worst thing we can do to our wives and still make it to heaven, Lord?"

And Jesus does something very interesting here. Whereas they are hung up on the problems, Jesus focuses on the possibilities. They ask him a question about divorce. He gives them an answer about marriage. They ask him what Moses "allows", and he points them to what the Law "commands". Jesus says, "Look, if you're going to go back as far as Deuteronomy, why not take it the distance and go back to Genesis? You are asking me what you can get away with. Let me talk with you about the Creator's intentions."

The disciples must have been aware of the fact that this was a controversy that was getting a lot of attention around the nation and later on, they pull him aside and say, "Really Jesus? You know, you sounded pretty harsh back there.

Is that what you meant to say? Because it sounded to us like you were saying that nobody should get divorced. Ever.”

The response that Jesus gives to his disciples is even more strict than the one favored by the rabbi Shammai. He says that Moses had to allow people to divorce because people were so hopelessly screwed up – but that God’s intentions for relationships were that men and women would come together and treat each other with love and justice. So Jesus gives the disciples a harder teaching than he gave to the Pharisees. “You heard me right, fellows.”

What’s that about? This is an outrageous, shocking teaching. If we were to take Jesus literally here, we’d be setting ourselves up for failure, wouldn’t we? I mean, while the numbers are a little bit tricky, the statistics indicate that about half of all of the marriages in the USA end in divorce. If Jesus is writing all of those people off, then he’s missing out on a pretty key demographic, wouldn’t you say?

Again, let me point out that Jesus isn’t talking primarily about divorce, he’s talking about marriage. He’s not talking about where we fall short, he’s talking about where we should be aiming. When it comes to human relationships like marriage, the goal is not to figure out how much we can get out of it, or how little we should put into it. The goal is that we enter into these relationships fully expecting that they will change us over time. That we will be shaped by those with whom we make our lives. We come into marriage and trust that as we give ourselves away, we become more who God wants us to be.

I want to point out at this juncture the setting for this discussion. Look at verse 1 of the chapter: Jesus and his followers are in Judea. Last week we talked about the fact that Jesus and the disciples, who had spent nearly three years in the region of Galilee, are leaving that area and heading towards Jerusalem. And what’s going to happen in Jerusalem? As he’s already pointed out to his followers twice, in Jerusalem, Jesus will suffer and die.

What’s the connection? Jesus is on his way to the cross- to a death that will wind up making a way for humanity to reconnect with God in ways that matter eternally. And as he is on that road, he stops to teach his disciples about what it means to participate in human relationships. A significant aspect of our participation, it would seem, is that when human beings truly love one another, it involves some measure of self-sacrifice. To put it bluntly, Jesus could have said, “You know, I’m on my way to die for you people. Could you please work a little harder at keeping your promises to each other? A man who gives up on his wife so that he can marry someone else is missing God’s best.”

Ok, Ok, now we’ve done it. Pastor Dave is putting the badmouth on people who have gotten divorced.

No, he’s not. Pastor Dave has never met anyone who, while thinking clearly, has indicated that divorce is an easy choice. It is a difficult, painful, ugly place – a place that many of us have had to visit simply because it was a less difficult, painful, and ugly place than the one we’d been in. I understand that. What I want to stress here is the notion that Jesus is much more interested in having you and me concentrate on God’s best for us rather than looking for the

minimum requirements that will allow us to get by.

Remember, Jesus is teaching his disciples the way of the cross. His point is that the way to true living is through dying to ourselves. As Lamar Williamson points out in his writing on this passage, “Nowhere is that model more applicable or more necessary than in the intimate, long-term relationship in which two persons become one.” Nowhere is the gospel challenge more clear than in this area: we are taught to be egocentric, to look out for ourselves, to get what we deserve and what we want. And Jesus says, over and over again, that the difficult path is often the most rewarding one, and we can trust in the Father’s hopes for us.

In that light, then, Jesus shifts to his discussion of children. He does so pointing out that a marriage that fails is one that has a legacy – and again, this is something that I don’t have to point out to anyone who is living in the midst of this pain. The crowds bring their babies to be blessed by Jesus, and the disciples figure to keep them away, thinking that it’s just going to be a hassle for the Master. But Jesus is angry and insists on blessing the children – and says that the disciples can learn a lesson from them.

I don’t think that Jesus means that we are supposed to be childlike in the sense that children are somehow holier than we are, or less prone to being affected by sin. My friend Suzy said to me one time, “anyone who doesn’t believe in the doctrine of the sinfulness of all people has never spent any time volunteering in the church nursery.” That’s true. We don’t have to teach our children how to be selfish or proud. You know, friends, that children are no holier than the rest of us.

Here’s what I think Jesus meant when he said that we had to enter the kingdom like children: when we begin to follow Christ, we have to recognize that we are starting over again. A child is full of questions, full of the ability to learn, full of wonder. When we seek to follow Jesus, we confess that we have to “forget” much of what we’ve learned and be open to a new way of life. We realize that God’s best for us includes a whole lot of things that don’t make sense apart from the Gospel. Things like dying to ourselves so that we might live for others; or giving our resources so that others can participate in life more fully...those things are tough to learn – and can only be learned when we are willing to forget the notion that it’s all about me, myself, and I.

In a few moments, I’ll be taking Robert Joseph Knapp, III from his parents arms and parading him around the sanctuary. Right now, that doesn’t mean diddly to Robert Joseph Knapp, III. And to be honest, tomorrow it will have meant nothing to Robert Joseph Knapp, III. But by the grace of God, Robert Joseph Knapp, III will come to see himself as a child of God because he is surrounded by other people who see both themselves and him as children of God. When his parents bring him forward in worship and say, “help us to name this baby...help us to teach this baby...help us to love this baby...” they are living out the truth of this passage, and recognizing that the best way for him to learn the truth is to be immersed in it by the likes of people like you.

So when you see little Bobby – or anyone else we’ve baptized in the last

fifty or seventy-five years or so – walking around this place, try to spend some energy thinking about God’s best intentions for you and for all of those children. You see, my hunch is that most of us do pretty well at remembering the ways that we’ve blown it. Most of us are aware of the times that we have tried and failed. Can we remind folks that sin is forgiven and that we are here to try to remember to aim for the best? Can we focus on the promise more than the problems? Celebrate and enjoy the gifts we receive, and follow Jesus down the path of sacrificial love. Amen.