

Because of your Hardness of Heart

Mark 10:2-16

Ute Molitor; First Congregational UCC in Camden; October 7, 2018

I am divorced and have remarried. Mere statistics would suggest that this is also true for a fair number of you, given a divorce rate of 50% in this country. The rate of divorce among remarried couples, especially if they have children, is even higher. I don't wish to make light of this but there are stories behind all these statistics, the real lives of real people. I got married when I was 21 to a wonderfully creative young man who wanted to become a minister. The closer he got to realizing his calling, the more he began to sabotage himself, slipping ever deeper into addiction and lies. He was unsuccessfully wrestling with self-loathing and the deep wound of a sense of abandonment from his early experiences.

As I learned through ALANON, I had to face my own co-dependent habits. I was over-functioning in trying to control chaos. I also got some mileage out of feeling dignified and justified as I acted like a victim and a rescue operator at the same time. Without going into details, I quickly learned that I was, in part, re-enacting some of the unhealthy dynamics I had witnessed between my parents who had brought their own baggage into their relationship. I suspect generations before them had done the same. I had to face some of my own early wounding and how focusing on someone else's issues had protected me from looking at my own.

My first marriage did not make it. Thirty years have passed and I am grateful for the ongoing humbling and healing journey of maturing. You will each have your own story of struggles in relationship. My aim in sharing is not to justify or condemn what happened in my life or yours. I am simply wanting to signal that we are all together in this struggle of building and maintaining life-giving covenants whether it be in our intimate relationships or the covenant we make with each other as members of a faith community. I bow to those of you who have lived in faithful and steadfast covenant with your spouse.

Let us now dive deeper into the context and potential meaning of Jesus' teaching for our relationships, including our marriages: some Pharisees are testing Jesus about his interpretation of Mosaic Law on divorce. They ask: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" They are probably trying to expose Jesus as unorthodox because Mosaic Law clearly permitted divorce for men but not for women. In true Rabbinic fashion, Jesus throws the question back at them: "What did Moses command you?" This is an intentional contrast between human made laws and God's will. Moses allowed men to write a certificate of divorce when a woman was not "pleasing" to her husband and he found "something objectionable" about her (i.e. Deut. 24:1-4).¹ Perhaps, the couple had not conceived and the woman was blamed, or she was not obedient or beautiful or enterprising enough.

A certificate of divorce was supposedly better for the woman than just getting tossed out of the house but it still left her exposed and in mercy of her original's family care who might reject her as disgraced. Or she depended on another man who was willing to marry her despite the stigma of being defiled since she had slept with another man. Clearly, the honor and shame of a family were identified with the woman, or more poignantly, her body.² Rights and privileges were reserved for men. This is still true in many parts of our world. Thankfully, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Nadia Murad who was held as a sex slave by ISIS and has risked her life speaking out on behalf of victims of such abuse. She shares the prize with Dr. Denis Mukwege from the DRC who has dedicated his life to aiding women who have suffered greatly physiologically, psychologically and spiritually as a result of rape. They are helping to raise awareness about how the mistreatment of women has become a weapon of war. But now let us return to our text.

¹ C. Clifton Black in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville), p. 140. Edited by D. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor.

² The law actually overtly forbade a man to remarry his own former wife should she get a certificate of divorce from her second husband because she was spoiled goods and would bring dishonor on the land (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

Jesus counters the Pharisees' reference to Moses by saying that Moses gave men permission to divorce not because God desired it but "because of the hardness of their hearts." I don't believe that Jesus is coming from a legalistic place. Given the context of his day, Jesus is actually making a daring move. By arguing against divorce, he is protecting women from being dismissed for selfish reasons of convenience or objectifying tendencies. I also cannot imagine that Jesus would demand that partners should stay together no matter what the cost, even in the face of abuse. Having said this, Jesus argues (vs.10-12) that both men and women are equally accountable to this original covenant (as was the custom in Roman law at the time). It's a two-way street. Today, we can thankfully say that this two-way street is real for all relationships, heterosexual and same sex alike and must all face the struggles involved.

The Greek word that we translate as "hardness of heart" is *sklerokardian*, literally "cardiosclerosis." I doubt that they knew about arteriosclerosis then. As we now know, it is a build-up of plaque that can in time obstruct and eventually block the flow of blood in our arteries, causing strokes and heart attacks. Right? That might be an apt metaphor for our relationships in which the flow of love becomes obstructed over time. Referring back to Genesis, Jesus describes the vision of a union in which husband and wife become "one flesh (Mk 10:8)."³ I think that Jesus is fundamentally saying that marriage, at its best, traditionally embodies in particular relationships what is actually our universal interdependence in a continuous flow of love. We are relational beings and cannot know who or whose we are outside of relating to others.

³ This image of being one flesh is also related to the imagined story of having Eve formed out of Adam's rib to exemplify that they are truly of the same kind and belong to each other. Of course, this image has been used harmfully to argue for the inferiority of women as coming from men. Likewise, the translation of woman as a "helpmate" has been used to defend the relegation of women to servitude.

Jesus poignantly calls upon children as examples of the kind of mindset we have to have if we want to live in life-giving ways with each other. Of course, on the one hand we observe how children struggle to develop beyond a self-relational ego focused perspective. But they also have much to teach us. Jesus says: “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it (Mk 10:15).” I suspect that Jesus is pointing to children because they are open and vulnerable in their need. They have a great capacity for wonder and curiosity.

In this sense, the kingdom (or reign or KINdom) represents a way of being with each other that is open to curiosity, surprise, vulnerability, awe and wonder as we continue to grow no matter how old we are. Children show us the attitudes that help keep love blood flowing lest our hearts harden. In contrast, criticism that turns every issue into a character defect, or defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling are the key attitudes and practices that create virtual plaque in our love arteries.⁴

They also affect our children as we respond to them directly or they observe us dealing with each other. Children need parents (and grandparents) to validate their feelings and guide them in understanding their experience. They may begin to doubt themselves, feel lonely and internalize emotions when parents are unresponsive or dismissive when kids try to connect, especially when there are tensions in the family. They may begin to ask: “Is this my fault? What’s wrong with me that I feel this way or you act this way?” Their sadness or anger may actually be saying: “Talk to me about what I am thinking and feeling.” The more we are willing to grow and flow and respond, the more our children can flourish.

Perhaps we can take today’s text also as a needed kick in the proverbial behind. Let us look for ways to deepen our relationships by asking what moves the other, why and how something matters to them, what they are hoping for. Research into what strengthens relationships actually suggests that while the content of our

⁴ *The Relationship Cure*, Gottman and Joan DeClaire.

conversations matters, it's the **act of responsiveness** itself that is most essential for building the trust that fortifies all relationships (see footnote 4). With God's grace, let us try to knock each other's socks off with our capacity for curiosity, grateful affection, and wonder. This might do wonders to our relationships and the softening of our hearts. Let us also be thankful that we believe in a God who continues to be in relationship with us. God is ever devising new ways to strengthen and renew our covenant with God's self, the source of life from which we all flow and to which we will all return, one body. This is true no matter how spectacular our failings or how beautiful our accomplishment are in relationships. Thanks be to God. Amen.