

WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER
Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on October 6, 2024

Texts: Genesis 2:18-24 & Mark 10:2-16

Genesis 2:18-24

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 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."

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 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. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Whatever committee decided which Sunday was going to be World Communion Sunday, I'm not sure they looked at the lectionary first. Because a reading about divorce doesn't seem like a great choice for a day that's supposed to be about unity. But when you put this reading into context, it actually does make sense.

This moment comes at a point in the gospel when the pressure is really ramping up. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and he knows what's going to happen when he gets there. He's going to suffer and die at the hands of the authorities. Which means the disciples are going to have to be ready to carry on without him, or else all of this will be for nothing. If they don't step up to the plate, Jesus' mission will die with him.

So like we've been hearing for the past couple of weeks now, Jesus has been trying to prepare them by telling them repeatedly what's going to happen in Jerusalem, and he's been very clear about it. But somehow the disciples still don't get it. They're in denial. They just don't want to face the truth.

So things are getting more and more urgent. Time's running out for Jesus, and the disciples still aren't anywhere close to being able to take on the kind of responsibility that's about to be dumped on their shoulders. And that's when a bunch of Pharisees come along and ask Jesus a seemingly random question about whether it's legal for a man to divorce his wife. And what's interesting is not only how Jesus answers them, but

how he turns this into a teaching moment for the disciples—a chance to drill into them just how crucial it is that they stay together when he's gone.

So how does a teaching on divorce accomplish that? Well, first of all, you have to realize this isn't just a random question. The Pharisees have an agenda—surprise, surprise. They want to discredit Jesus, and they're trying to do that by drawing him into a technical argument about the law and hoping he'll say something they can twist around and use against him. But Jesus doesn't take the bait. Instead, he asks them a question: "What did Moses command you?" And being experts in the law, they know the right answer: Moses said a man could divorce his wife by giving her a certificate of dismissal.

However, there's a little more to it than that.

This was actually kind of a grey area. Moses said a man could divorce his wife, but he didn't say for what reason, and there were different schools of thought about that. Some authorities said a man could divorce his wife only if she committed adultery. Other authorities said a man could divorce his wife just for looking at him funny.

So the Pharisees are trying to get Jesus tangled up in this debate. But he avoids the trap by reframing the whole conversation. Instead of talking about what's right in the eyes of the law, he gives the Pharisees (and the disciples) a lesson on what's good in the eyes of God. And he does so by going back to the beginning, the very beginning, before the law even existed, before Israel even existed, and looking at what God's intentions were when God created humankind.

He tells the Pharisees that God made the first man and the first woman for each other, to be companions and partners and to keep each other from being lonely. That's why God took a rib from the man and used it to make the woman. God meant for the two of them to be one—"bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh," as Genesis puts it. "Therefore,"

Jesus says, “what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

So Jesus doesn't give the Pharisees what they want. They want to pin him down on this issue. They want to get him on the record. But he side-steps the whole question and makes this a conversation about something much bigger than what the law requires. He makes it a conversation about what God wants. And for him, what God wants, what God desires, what God wills is and always has been for human beings to share our lives with one another rather than be alone; and to help and support one another rather than each of us trying to make our own way in the world.

So when it comes to the question of divorce, whether it's permissible or not, Jesus doesn't give the Pharisees a clear-cut answer. It's not that simple, he seems to be saying. We can't boil it down to a yes or a no. But what we can do is look at the kind of life God wants for us in general, the kind of life God had in mind for us from the beginning, and try to be faithful to that vision. And he's saying that for the benefit of the disciples more than anyone else.

This is a lesson they need to learn. And they're not going to learn it right away. They're still in pretty deep denial. But after Jesus is gone, and they're alone and afraid, and they're tempted to give up and go their separate ways—that's when they'll finally get it. They'll remember this moment, and it'll dawn on them that Jesus wasn't only talking about marriage. He wasn't only talking about one kind of relationship. He was

talking about all kinds of relationships, including theirs.

They'll realize that the whole time he was talking to the Pharisees, Jesus was really talking to them. He was encouraging them to be faithful to God's vision by not separating what God had joined together.

Jesus had joined them together. Jesus had called them from their separate lives and made them into a community—a community that would continue what he started after he was gone. That was his intention, that was his vision, from the beginning—the beginning of his ministry—and the disciples will finally embrace it.

So that's why this reading about divorce, as strange as it may seem, is actually the perfect choice for World Communion Sunday—because World Communion Sunday is about seeing that we're part of a community with Christians everywhere. It's about seeing that God has joined all of us together in a single body—the body of Christ. And it's about realizing that we all have a common purpose—to share God's love especially with those who are hurting.

And about that common purpose, I'd like to share a poem that was written by a pastor in Canada for World Communion Sunday back in 2015. It's called “*The Table With No Edges.*”

We will sit down where feet tire from the journey.
We will sit down where grief bends the back.

We will sit down under roofs wrecked by artillery.
We will sit down where cries sound from cracked walls.

We will sit down where heat beats like hammers.
We will sit down where flesh shivers in cold.

We will sit down where bread bakes on charcoal.
We will sit down where there is no grain in baked fields.

We will sit down with those who dwell in ashes.

We will sit down in shadow and in
light.

We will sit down, making friends
out of strangers.
We will sit down, our cup filled with
new wine.

We will sit down and let love flow
like language.
We will sit down where speech
needs no words.

We will sit together at the table with
no edges.
We will sit to share one loaf, in
Christ's name, in one world.

Amen, and happy World Communion
Sunday.