

“The Challenge and Blessing of Divorce”
Mark 10:13-15

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As a pastor and general religion enthusiast, I have visited dozens of different congregations throughout my lifetime. Out of those dozens of experiences, there is one first-time church visitor experience that stands out from the others. Right next to the famous Boston Common, there is a church called Park Street Church. This church, like many churches in our denomination of the United Church of Christ, is a congregational church. When I moved to Boston right after college, I was so excited to worship in this historic congregation. The one catch was I hadn't yet realized that even though there were many congregational churches in my beloved United Church of Christ, there are also some congregational churches that are intentionally NOT a part of the United Church of Christ. This is either because they never joined when the UCC formed, or they later left, usually over LGBT issues. Park Street Church is definitely a congregational church that is NOT a part of my beloved, progressive United Church of Christ.

I didn't know that, so on a beautiful fall Sunday morning, I eagerly entered the sanctuary of Park Street Church. I was running late, and because unlike other places in the country, New Englanders aren't known for sneaking in during the first hymn, the pews were packed. I had to do the walk of shame all the way down the aisle to the third row, in the center, right in front of the pulpit. The worship started out comfortable enough with familiar language for prayers and praise songs, but my comfort turned to discomfort during the sermon.

That morning the pastor gave a 40 minute sermon on divorce. Specifically, for 40 minutes he preached that the Bible says divorce is wrong, and so there is no reason you should ever, ever,

ever get divorced. He addressed adultery, but said that can and should be overcome. He was silent on any type of abuse but did name LGBT issues, maintaining again that any and all problems could be overcome by a couple with the right kind of counseling, commitment, and prayer. For these forty minutes, he made sure to check every single box on the “what not to say about divorce” checklist.

I wanted to scream or walk out, but had not yet recovered from my first self-conscious walk down the aisle to the front, and found myself paralyzed in my seat, wishing the floor would open up and swallow me whole. What was worse than the things this pastor kept saying was the fact that no one else walked out. There wasn't so much of a grumble of disagreement from across the large, crowded sanctuary. It caused me to question my own experiences and beliefs about divorce, and it made me wonder what other beliefs this congregation held. It made me feel incredibly alone and incredibly vulnerable. I never went back to Park Street Church.

I had attended churches my whole life, but this was the first sermon I ever heard on divorce. Since this experience, I have come to believe that silence on divorce can be as harmful as the sermon I heard that morning. When harmful theology is taught from the pulpit, it is given more weight and authority than if someone is spouting off in a casual conversation between friends. It is seemingly backed by the church, the gathered congregation, and the whole faith tradition they are a part of. And as long as harmful theology is taught, whether it is about divorce or another topic, we need to have the words to speak against it. So, this is the message I wish I had heard about divorce that Sunday morning at Park Street Church.

Marriage is hard work. It's the number one thing people told me about marriage when I got engaged. They would add that it is also wonderful and exciting and fulfilling, but the hard work always comes first. I would add to marriage that partnership, whether or not the state is legally involved, is hard work. Folks who choose to marry or partner all know this to a certain

degree, but it is not until you're in the midst of a long-term relationship that you understand how it is hard work that keeps changing, so each partner has to continue to adapt in order for the work to continue. In most relationships there will be moments when one or both partners wonder if the hard work is too much, or if it is worth it, or if they have the ability to continue on in the work.

For some marriages, there are many, many good reasons to stay. Through entire seasons of unimaginable pain or heartache, there can and are compelling reasons that couples stay together and make it work. But it is also true, that for some marriages, there are many, many good reasons to leave. For some couples, the seasons of unimaginable pain and heartache cannot be overcome in a way that allows the marriage to continue. This includes but is not limited to relationships where abuse or destruction is part of the relationship. And no matter what path two people take, it is not a judgement of their character or their strength.

Whether a relationship lasts for as long as we both shall live, or whether it ends in separation or divorce to make way for new life, it is a reflection of two people trying to navigate the difficult waters of relationship through the unpredictability and messiness of life. This is true whether the couple is together for a few years or a few decades. This is true whether or not two people have children together or whether or not their friends and family are convinced they are the perfect couple. There are many reasons to stay, and many reasons to leave. Both are decisions that only the people in a relationship can make or fully understand.

Marriage and divorce has been a big part of my family's story. Both of my parents are on their third marriage, and both sides of my grandparents have been divorced and some remarried. This meant that as a kid I had more Christmas celebrations with different family configurations than any other kid I knew. It was fabulous. It also means that I have witnessed divorce as both a challenge and a blessing. I say blessing because when someone dares to imagine life on the other side of a marriage, they are embodying the hope of resurrection. They are willing to risk the

comfort or familiarity of a current life with the hope and prayer that whatever awaits them on the other side will be new and scary, but that it will still be life, and it might even be a life leading to wholeness and hope.

There is a lot of grief at the end of a relationship, even when it is amicable. There is grief over unmet expectations and at shifting dreams and hopes. There is grief of a loss of a particular identity in the world. For those that find themselves in the wilderness of divorce and separation, it is an upside down wilderness that at times feels lonely, unsettling, and scary.

As bystanders, when we see a couple struggle together or go through a divorce, we often do not know what to say. It can bring up a lot of feelings from our own life and relationships that we project onto the couple, or that we are afraid we will project. It can feel incredibly awkward as their changing dynamics shift the dynamics they have with the people around them.

In a faith community, where we don't want to say the wrong thing, we sometimes default to saying nothing at all. There is a space for faith communities to offer support for folks going through a divorce. Support does not mean unsolicited advice, proclamations that you “always knew that guy was no good,” or offers to hook you up with a niece, but it might mean asking, “How are you doing?” “I imagine this has not been an easy time for you. What support do you need?” It might mean making a casserole or offering to babysit. It might also mean saying, “I want you to know that you are loved, no matter what.”

For couples who have been involved in a church together, it is not uncommon for one person to stay and the other to leave. That is for a couple to navigate and figure out their new boundaries – and it is a church's role to respect their decision and to make sure that whoever continues participating in the church, in whatever way they do, they feel the same affirmation and welcome that they always felt. On a more formal level, making sure that our church is welcoming to folks who are divorced or not partnered means making sure all of our language isn't centered

around families – making sure there is space for individuals, singles, divorcees, widows, couples, and couples with kids in our language, our signage, and our welcome.

I have stayed silent on scripture this morning. I intentionally chose the passage that we read together because it is partnered with verses that come before it, verses where Jesus speaks on the custom of divorce and first says, “What God has joined together, let no one separate,” and then, if there is a divorce, condemns remarriage. I didn't include those passages in the bulletin because I didn't want anyone to read them before worship and think for a second that this was a condemnation of divorce today. Marriage in Jesus' time was done not out of love or companionship, but because of wealth, economic status, power, and business. There was no equality between two partners – a wife was beholden to her husband. This is why the passage on divorce is paired with the passage that we read, the one on children. In both cases, Jesus was calling attention to vulnerable populations and preaching that people should care for these populations. In those days, divorce put women at great risk, and made them more vulnerable, and so he spoke against it.

It is helpful to understand this context the next time you come across a passage in the Bible condemning divorce, but I don't think it is helpful to understand how we might find hope for someone who is in the modern wilderness of divorce. Instead of those passages, I turn to the words of the prophet Isaiah. I want to share them with you now in the hope that they will be a blessing in the wilderness for those who need them. These words are from Isaiah, Chapter 43:

Thus says God our Creator: I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

Do not fear, for I am with you.

Do not remember the former things,

or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing;

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

The wild animals will honor me,

the jackals and the ostriches;

for I give water in the wilderness,

rivers in the desert,

to give drink to my chosen people,

the people who I formed for myself

so that they might declare my praise.

Do not fear, for I am with you.