

Divorce, Reconciliation, and Representation

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Preaching on:
Matthew 5:21–37

So frequently when I preach to you especially with from a dense piece of scripture, like the one that we have just been given (there is a lot in there!) I will pick one little tiny thing and I'll try and say a whole lot about one little tiny thing. And this Sunday I'm going to do something different. I'm going to try and say a little bit about a whole lot of different things and do a teaching sermon and attempt to do it quickly so that we can get onto our annual meeting at the end of the service. And this morning, I want to start with divorce.

I don't think this is something that I've preached about before, and it wasn't what I wanted to preach about this Sunday, but there it was in the text, and a number of you have come to me recently to tell me about how much pain and suffering you have been through in the church tradition of your origin in connection with your divorce—that it alienated you from God and from your from your own spiritual life and it drove you from the church because you were just trying to make the very best decision that you could make for yourself, for your children, and for your spouse. And you were rejected and told that you were doing the wrong thing.

This morning you may not have noticed that Jesus was teaching about divorce, and that is because I changed the translation. If you look in your bulletin, next to where it says Matthew chapter five, verses 21 through 37, it says, N R S V U E, new revised standard version, updated edition. And then there's a little "alt." That's because Pastor Jeff updated the translation. The original translation from the NRSVUE says this:

It was also said, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorce, woman commits adultery.

This is a terrible translation. It is really just about the worst translation that I could imagine of these words. Now, the NRSV is trying to do something. It's trying to update the language into language that we understand. But when you do that, you miss out on a whole lot of important context. And the important context here is that in Jesus' day and culture, divorce, as we understand it, did not exist.

Divorce as we understand it is that there are two parties who can initiate divorce. Either spouse can initiate it. There is a legal proceeding to make sure that that divorce is fair and equitable to both sides. Now, we can say it's not always fair and equitable to both sides, but that is the intention. And a lot has been put into that. That's not the way it worked in Jesus's day. In Jesus' day, divorce was not an option for women. They could not initiate a divorce. You were in a marriage, you were stuck in it, and divorce was an option for men. This is why divorce isn't even the right word. It was really more about abandoning your wife or dismissing her. There was a very healthy conversation and debate going on about when it was acceptable to dismiss your wife. And there was a position that was, in Jesus' day, a popular position that a man could dismiss his wife—it was like employment at will—for any reason or no reason at all. He could just dismiss her on a whim and then she would be out of the family, out of the household. She wouldn't have a place to live. She would have no money to support her. Culturally, she wasn't allowed to have a job. So she often fell into a life of ill repute as a prostitute. And it was a very difficult life. Jesus is not forbidding divorce as we understand it. He is forbidding the practice of abandoning your wife in order to marry another woman. Frequently, this was because your wife was unable to conceive a child, so you would dismiss her and then you would marry another wife so that you could have children and your abandoned wife lived a very difficult life of poverty at the margins. This is what Jesus is concerned with. It is a social justice issue. He is concerned with women who have been abandoned, and he is forbidding that practice. He is not forbidding divorce as we understand it.

And just imagine the irony here of how many abused women throughout history, Christian history, have been told that they needed to remain in their marriages because it's what Jesus wants them to do—that they need to remain in their marriage and bear their cross in this abusive relationship and pray that their husband can change and try to be a gentling influence on him. And how many women have

died and how many children have died because of that advice out of the idea that Jesus cares more about holding a marriage together than about women, when in fact Jesus cares more about abused women than the cultural practices around marriage in his day? I think that's very important to note here.

And you know you may be a divorced person and you're not proud of your divorce and you think it was a mistake, and that's also okay. That is a good sign that God is with you, moving along with you trying to help you to grow, to become a more committed person, to grow past some of the deficiencies that may have caused your marriage to fail. We are all on a journey. We are all growing. I am growing. And that is an okay way to feel about your own divorce. It's not an okay way to think about other people's divorces because God tells us, Jesus tells us we should not judge others. Which brings me to the beginning of our scripture reading in which Jesus says, Hey, you all know you're not supposed to murder, but let me tell you, if you even call somebody a fool, a fool, you are liable to the fires of hell.

Woo. That's a tough one. That is harsh. That's a lot to deal with. And I think here we have to also, again, think about the context. Is the problem that Jesus overheard somebody talking about their idiot neighbor under their breath, oh, that fool. And Jesus came over and said, "Hey, you know, you could go to hell for that. I don't like that kind of thing." Is it that Jesus is saying that, hey, you know if you're going to be mad at somebody, you might as well just go all the way and murder them because it's basically the same thing, same punishment at the end. Just go ahead and murder them and then try and get rid of the body because it's equivalent. Contextually, that doesn't make sense.

Jesus isn't saying that being angry with someone or calling someone a fool is as bad as murder. That is not the point here. What Jesus is doing (what he always does) is he's arresting us with shocking language and trying to bump our minds out of the way that they're accustomed to thinking. I believe if you look at Jesus' entire corpus of teaching through the gospels, one of the things that he's most concerned with is not being a hypocrite and not judging other people. So Jesus says to us, "Hey, it's easy to think horrible things about murderers, sure, but remember, you're no better than them. They're just a person just like you. You've had the very same thoughts in your heart and your mind, the thoughts that can lead to anger, and the anger which leads to resentment, and the resentment that leads to violence, and the violence that leads to murder. Those seeds are in you too. You're no different than them. Maybe you haven't murdered anyone, and maybe that's because you had advantages that this person didn't have. Maybe it's because you just got lucky. Maybe it's because you didn't go through what they went through. But don't judge other people for the mistakes that they have made. And be honest about the fact that the very seeds of the acts that they committed may also well exist in you. Don't judge other people."

When we turn to Jesus's teaching on adultery, also a very hard teaching in that it seems to convict all of us, I think that's also about being a hypocrite. But then Jesus moves on to this even more shocking teaching. If your eye offends you cast it out. It's better to throw your eye away than to go into to hell

with two eyes. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It's better to have only one hand than to live with two hands and end up in hell.

It's very important that Jesus is not being literal here. And we know that Jesus is not being literal here because Jesus didn't go around plucking out people's eyes and cutting off their hands and feet, which is a very good thing to keep in mind. Jesus went around healing people and never once ever did he ever pluck out anybody's anything or chop off anybody's anything. Throughout history, the church has interpreted this as being symbolic, striking, shocking language to bump us out of the way that we think and to help us to understand that casting sin out of our life can feel as difficult as chopping off a hand or plucking out an eye. And it can feel as hard to do, but that it is very important to do it. Which brings me to the fact that this Sunday is Racial Justice Sunday in the UCC.

And I have two points I'd like to make about Racial Justice Sunday. One is about reconciliation and the other is about representation. And if we look at the first paragraph of our scripture reading this morning, we see that Jesus says, Hey, if you're there at the altar giving your offering to God, and you remember that a neighbor has a good reason to be upset with you, or got something against you, leave the offering, go to your neighbor, reconcile. That is an incredible teaching. And we've heard it so many times, it seems mundane to us, but it is shocking. I have frequently preached from this pulpit that the most important teaching in Christianity is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. I think that this is the primary Christian teaching and the one that should be the focus of our attention as opposed to any other teaching.

For instance, Is Jesus Christ your personal Lord and Savior? I think that is an important question. I don't think it is the central question of Christianity because it puts us in this position where we believe that Jesus is teaching us that to get to God the most important thing is to go through Jesus to get to God. Now, the Gospel of John does teach that, but in the other gospels we see Jesus saying over and over and over again, Do you want to get to God? Go through your neighbor. The way you treat your neighbor and the way you live with your neighbor is how you get to God. And in fact, if you're having a problem with that and you'd prefer to deal with me than to deal with your neighbor, then think of your neighbor as me—to the point that when you say, Jesus, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you? When were you in prison and we visited you? Well, when you did it for the very least of these, you did it to me.

There is no way in Christianity to get around living in right relationship with your neighbor and this scripture reading proves it because it tells that before you can be in right relationship with God, you have to be in right relationship to your neighbor. Thinking about this in terms of racial justice, if you love God, you have to love racial justice. And if you want to live in right relationship to God, you have to be working in some way towards racial justice. Now, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and our children's book this morning said, Don't worry. This is very easy to do! Sharing and caring and loving and hugging and kissing <laugh> is all it takes. We adults know that it's not that easy, right? Thinking about

how we address issues of racial justice in our congregation and in the community surrounding us and in our wider world is very difficult. And I would like to just offer one suggestion to think about in our church, and that's about representation. And I'm, I'm thinking especially about the art in our church.

Two years ago almost exactly, I preached about art in the church, and I specifically focused on the picture of Jesus welcoming in the children over to my left on the left hand side of the chancel and the reasons why I felt like that was a woefully inadequate representation of the Kingdom of God because it shows a white Jesus welcoming only white children. And that does not reflect the demographic realities of our church any longer. Nor has it ever reflected the theological ideals and values of the Christian tradition. And especially thinking about the fact that we have now people of color in our congregation and young children in our congregation who are people of color, let's about what it says to them when they look at art in the sanctuary, sacred art that seems to only or predominantly depict white people. We do have a number of beautiful images of people of color on the stained glass in the back of the sanctuary over here of the Jesus Christ, Rex Mundi. It's lovely. I wish, I wish, and you don't always get everything you want, but boy, do I wish that Jesus wasn't the whitest person on that piece of stained glass. I wish that they had just gone one or two shades darker to more historically represent the fact that Jesus probably was not the whitest person in the world and probably wouldn't have been considered a white person at all if we were to see him today. And it would also have given the people of color in our congregation an opportunity to see themselves and their own depiction in the image of God, which is very important, rather than, again, seeing whiteness as the only proper image of God.

I was reading an article about transracial adoption this week, and there's a woman named Angela Tucker who was adopted out of foster care. She's a black woman, adopted out of foster care into a white family, and now she's an advocate for adoption. And this is what she said about this topic:

“Similarly Angela Tucker recalls how her mom spent days trying to track down black cabbage patch dolls in the 1980s. Not just for me, but for all of my siblings. She wanted all of her kids to understand that blackness is not like second class citizenry Tucker says. I think that's really deep messaging that gets programmed unless you have parents that are calling out. Tucker says, having black artwork on the walls also matters if your house doesn't feature any art with black or brown people. You're communicating to this child that they don't have a space here. She explains. Burkey grew up in a home where her parents listened to black artists and read children's books written by black authors to her and her siblings. They were, they were signs like, you belong here. She says They didn't go unnoticed.”

And maybe in 2023 and thinking about representation and racial justice in our congregation, I think there is room. I don't think any art has been added to this sanctuary in 50, 60 years, and maybe it's time that we thought of a way of representing in 2023 and the years ahead the changing demographics of our congregation, the way we think about the image of God, and what our values are as a church that wants to live in right relationship to God and to all our neighbors.