

October 7, 2018

Malachi 2:10-16, Mark 10:2-12

“Marriage: A Living Picture”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As I was preparing for the message today, I came across the website of a divorce and family law firm that lists divorce statistics for 2018 (<https://www.wf-lawyers.com/divorce-statistics-and-facts/>). The 112 facts and rates that were listed, were based on over 115 studies. I would like to share with you just one piece of information: "Over a 40 year period, 67 percent of first marriages terminate." I want you to absorb that for a moment. In the United States, "over a 40 year period, 67 percent of first marriages terminate." I find it staggering to consider that only 33 percent of first marriages will survive over a 40 year period in the U.S.

Now, I am acutely aware of the fact that as I speak about the topic of divorce, I am mostly likely going to step on some toes. After all there will be many who will hear and read this sermon who have been divorced. Not only may I step on some toes but, for some who are not divorced or haven't been married, there will be a tendency to shut down while saying to themselves: "this sermon isn't about me!" But, according to our Old Testament lesson, there is a much deeper thought involved in the whole topic of divorce that is rarely considered. Divorce has something to say about our relationship with God. Marriage is connected to our relationship with God. And even if you aren't married or never get married in this life, you are betrothed to God by faith, and are committed to a spiritual marriage with him. So, there is no excuse to shut down and take a nap during the sermon today.

In the Scripture, time and again our Savior is portrayed as the faithful one in a relationship with us, his people. He is the one who always holds to his promises. In fact, even in the face of those who are faithless, he remains faithful. In 2 Timothy 2:13, Paul writes: "if we are faithless, he remains faithful for he cannot deny himself." When it says that "he cannot deny himself," we are to understand that it is the nature of Jesus to remain faithful even in a relationship where the other has "gone off the deep end," so to speak. In the face of unfaithfulness, Jesus will not use that as an excuse to take back his promises. His promises always stand. As long as it is today, there is still his love, forgiveness, and commitment to the relationship. God says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Paul comments, "Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation (2 Cor. 6:2)."

Unfaithfulness comes from us, not from him. And unfaithfulness shows its ugly face on two occasions in our Old Testament lesson, and they are interconnected. The first occasion is when the people of God show their unfaithfulness to him by flirting with a foreign god. Idolatry is more than just bowing down to an idol and expecting good things. Idolatry is when we place our fear, love, and trust in anything and/or anyone other than he who loves us with an everlasting love. The Lord is love and invites true love. He looks upon his people as his beloved wife. This is how he saw things in Malachi's day, and this is how he sees things today.

The second occasion, when God's people show their unfaithfulness to him, is when their earthly marriages end up in divorce. Earthly marriages were designed to serve as living pictures of a relationship with the one who designed and established marriage from the very beginning. Eric S. Hartzell writes:

Marriage and faithfulness to the marriage partner is a reflection of the marriage God wants to exist between himself and his people. He has always been faithful to his people in his marriage to them. He wants them in turn to be faithful to each other in their own individual marriages. Broken marriage is broken trust. As such it stands as a blatant monument for everyone to see that human beings are unable and unwilling to be faithful. It is a wailing and lamenting witness to the failure of two people to keep their word.

We have become a culture that is thickly calloused to divorce. Divorce and all of the evils that come with it are considered to be not all that bad. But a healthy dose of our Old Testament lesson cuts deeply into the callous to bring us some sort of feeling about the matter. First of all, the prophet talks about how, in an earthly marriage, two are brought together and become "one flesh." Then the prophet moves into the spiritual component. He writes: "'For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her,' says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'covers his garment with violence,' says the Lord of hosts. 'So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless (Malachi 2:16).'" Before I explain this verse, it is important to understand that while man is the focus of this text, what can be said of him can also be said of a woman in a divorce.

Theodore Laetsch writes: "Divorce is like a filthy spot on a garment, on one's clothing, reputation, stigmatizing him or her as guilty of 'violence,' atrocious wickedness, outrageous criminality, a sin which is attached to a word that is the same word that is used to explain why God destroyed the world with a flood (Genesis 6:11,13)." Although our pew Bibles do not translate it this way, in the Hebrew, Malachi 2:16 starts by saying: "For the Lord God of Israel hates divorce." And Jesus says in our Gospel lesson, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate (Mark 10:9)."

Now, when our Old Testament lesson says, "So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless," we are to understand that our relationship with God is intimately affected by any breach of faith that takes place in the body. In divorce, the one flesh relationship is ripped apart and touches our spiritual relationship with our Creator and Lord. Eric S. Hartzell explains:

The faithlessness that may take place in a physical way comes as a result of a faithless spirit . . . We certainly see and feel the havoc wreaked in homes by divorce, and we realize that when this happens Christian instruction is frequently one of the first things to suffer . . . Besides this, what chance do children have of being "godly offspring" after they have witnessed the selfishness, lovelessness, inability to forgive, unfaithfulness and refusal to sacrifice inherent in divorce? . . . Unfaithfulness is a matter of violence.

This should bother all of us deeply. The horrible results that we see in a divorce are similar to what results from any type of spiritual unfaithfulness, regardless of the sin. In fact, every time anyone of us breaks the first commandment and lives in a state of unrepentance has been divorced from God, and such unfaithfulness will necessarily wreak havoc in our lives. It is the goal of Jesus in our Gospel lesson to break through the hardness of the heart - our calloused hearts - when it comes to all sins that we pursue that end up divorcing us from God. It just so happens that earthly divorce is a sharp example that clearly touches on what sin does to our spiritual marriage with the one who made us. Therefore, let us turn back

to the words that we already quoted in 2 Timothy 2:13, "if we are faithless, he remains faithful for he cannot deny himself."

Most of us know that in the Scripture God allows for divorce in two circumstances: 1) when a spouse has had sexual relations with another; and 2) if a spouse abandons the other. Still, divorce is something that God would have us to avoid through Christ. Why? Because whether it is allowed by Scripture or not, it damages us in varying degrees on different levels, to some extent immediately, as well as over time. In a Scriptural divorce, the innocent party may remarry, but the Christian pastor "will not perform a marriage ceremony for a guilty person who is not penitent, 1 Cor. 6:9-20," as John H. C. Fritz correctly says in *Pastoral Theology*.

Wherever we have violated Scripture and have been faithless, Jesus is faithful. Nowhere do we see this more clearly than we do at the cross where Jesus died for all sins. Divorce can be healed by forgiveness. For that matter, any sin that has divorced us from God can be ultimately healed in Christ. We see this powerfully displayed in the life of the Samaritan woman at the well, who was not only what we might call "a divorce factory" (she had been married to five men), but she was an adulterous woman who was further living with a man outside of marriage. She is condemned for all of this. It is no wonder then that she would want to change the subject with Jesus by saying, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus offers himself to her by saying, "I who speak to you am he (John 4:25-26)."

Broken promises, divorce, struggling marriages, and every sin for that matter, can be healed by Jesus who offers himself as the Messiah, the Savior of the world. The Samaritan woman at the well was an adulterous, repeatedly so. Jesus speaks about adultery in our Gospel lesson (Mark 10:11-12). There also is another adulterous mentioned in Scripture who was just about stoned to death. She was absolutely full of Godly remorse. Jesus reassured her that she was not condemned, and then lovingly said to her: "go, and from now on sin no more (John 8:1-11)." Jesus says the same to all of us for divorce and every sin that has ultimately wrecked our relationship with him. "You are forgiven!" But with that most blessed forgiveness, there is a strong warning to struggle with sin and overcome it in the cross. Otherwise, as Jesus says to the invalid who had been forgiven and healed, but chose to pursue sin anyway: "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you (John 5:14)."

Amen.

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