

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
October 7, 2018
Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
He's not ashamed to claim you

—Hebrews 2:9-11

So Jesus, what do you think about divorce? That was the question the Pharisees asked Jesus: *“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”* The question was not asked merely for information, nor was it asked out of concern for a wife. It was meant to test Jesus and get him into trouble. Certainly Jesus knew that. But even so, Jesus does answer the question, first by asking his own question back at them. *“What did Moses command you?” he replied.* They answered, *“Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send [his wife] away.* Moses allowed a man to divorce his wife.” And that’s true. Moses did talk about issuing divorce certificates in Deuteronomy chapter 24. But Jesus explains why Moses allowed that. *“It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law.”* Since divorce is a reality in this world, there need to be rules to regulate it. But from Jesus’ point of view, there is a hardening of heart involved when a person just wants a divorce. A hard heart toward the other spouse, a hard heart toward God. And that is sin.

Jesus goes back to the basics, way beyond Deuteronomy chapter 24, all the way back to the first chapters of the whole Bible, Genesis one and two. On day six of creation, God made human beings, one male, and then a female. On that same day six of creation, God made marriage, defined by God as *“a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”* The first man and woman became the first husband and wife. This is how it was at the beginning, and this is how God always wanted it to be. In Jesus’ own words, *“They are no longer two—the man and his wife—but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”* Let no one separate a married couple. Not the husband. Not the wife. Not a sly little fox who wants to weasel into the marriage and break it up. Not a friend or a counselor who advises, “You know, it would just be better for the two of you to divorce than to keep arguing all the time.” Let no one do this, Jesus says. It doesn’t mean that divorce can’t happen. It certainly can, and it certainly does. But Jesus says it shouldn’t happen. He forbids it.

When Jesus’ public talk with the Pharisees was over, the disciples wanted Jesus to tell them more in private. So they asked Jesus about all this, and he explained: *“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her.”* Leaving your old wife because you want a new model is wrong. It is a sin against God, and it is a sin against your wife. And it goes the other way, too. Leaving your old husband because you want a new one is wrong. It is a sin against your husband, and it is a sin against God. As Jesus says, *“If she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.”* Mark chapter 10 does not mention the exception Jesus gave in the same context in Matthew chapter 19, where Jesus said that a man commits adultery who divorces his wife, *“except for marital unfaithfulness.”* If she has a sexual relationship with another man or woman outside the marriage, she broke up the marriage. In that case, the husband may obtain a divorce. Likewise, if a husband has a sexual relationship with a woman or man outside the marriage, he broke up the marriage. In that case, she may obtain a divorce. But the exceptions are not mentioned in Mark chapter 10. In Mark the words are specifically directed at anyone contemplating divorce as a way to go after someone else, anybody else, or any other situation other than being married to your current spouse.

We need to hear Jesus’ words about marriage. I think it’s safe to say that marriage must surely be one of the good Lord’s most despised, most misused, and most abused gifts on planet earth, and it seems to be getting worse. Marriage gets blamed for a lot, but there is absolutely no reason to blame marriage. Look at it like this. In any case of giving, there is a giver, there is a gift, and there is a recipient of that gift. God gives marriage. Marriage is God’s gift. Anyone who is married is the receiver of that wonderful gift of God. God is good. He is always good. Marriage is good. God created marriage and gave it as a gift while his world was still perfect without sin. So if the giver is good and the gift is good, when anything goes wrong in marriage, what’s the problem? The recipient. You. Your wife, your husband. The person, the people in the marriage. That’s the problem.

If a divorce is what you are looking for, it’s not hard to get one, legally speaking. Just file for it, mention something about irreconcilable differences (there won’t be any specific fault attached to your name), and wait the mandatory 60 days in Arizona. Oh sure, you will have to figure out some finances. You will have to make some custody arrangements if you have had kids together. But the legal system is all set up to handle this. And if you can’t figure things out in a civil way for yourself, then they will figure it out for you, and you will be obligated to abide by the court’s decisions. No, it’s not hard to get a divorce. It might be emotionally draining for you for a while, but you might eventually get over that, too. The hard part about getting the divorce you want is having to deal with what your God says about it. “I hate divorce,” God says through his prophet Malachi. Divorce gets legally permitted because your hearts are hard, is what Jesus says. If you are looking for his stamp of approval on your divorce, if you are looking for him to justify all your actions, I wouldn’t ask him what he thinks about divorce. You won’t like the answer.

I haven't even gotten near the main point of today's sermon. All this groundwork is being laid because of what I am about to talk about next. None of what follows is meant to undermine what God says about marriage or divorce. None of what follows is meant to even hint at saying that divorce is okay. As is often said and must be said again, there is always sin involved in every divorce. Somebody's unfaithfulness. Somebody's failure to keep a solemn marriage vow. Somebody's failure to maintain a loving companionship. Somebody's selfishness. Either the husband's or the wife's. Or in many cases, both of them.

Some of you sit here today divorced. You are here in God's house to hear the word of your God. And the burning question in your heart, probably a question brought on by your conscience more than once, is this: "Jesus, what do you think of me?" That's a great question. It's a deep question. Why would you ask it? A Christian person I know, for whom I have a great deal of respect, had gone through a divorce before I became the person's pastor. Looking back at the aftermath of divorce, that person said, "Pastor, I needed to get to a point where I stopped trying to justify myself and just look to God's grace." If that's where you are at, and you are asking Jesus what he thinks of you, then here's your answer.

We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.

On the night before his death, Jesus' disciples failed him big time. Though they had made big claims that they would never forsake him, they did. First they slept, and then they fled, in his hour of greatest personal need. One of them even essentially made a vow that he would die before ever disowning and denying Jesus. A few hours later, to save his own skin, that disciple disowned Jesus and denied ever knowing him. Those were the failures of the disciples. Jesus maintained his own focus. Though true God, Jesus became a man so low that he needed the assistance of angels. Angels strengthened him that night after he sweat blood and tears pleading with his Father in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knew what was in store for him: there was honor and glory awaiting him on the other side of the cross. There was joy over there. But in the moment, Jesus was also well aware of what was right in front of him. Suffering and death. The mockery. The humiliations. The hatred. Spit, punches, whips, and nails. The physical pains. The mental strains. The emotional drains. His soul being overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. He was about to drink all by himself the full cup of God's wrath and punishment against human sin. A terrible, horrible thing. Through it all, Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. He was tasting death for everyone. He knew why he was tasting death for everyone. To make them holy. To make people who were unholy and sinful, holy and sinless in the eyes of God the Father. He suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again from the dead.

When he came back from death, like he said he would, the first and really the only people he met up with again were his followers. Women and men who had believed in him as the Son of God and the Savior of the world. His interactions with them were significant, especially significant for anyone sitting here today with that burning question in his heart and on her mind, "Jesus, what do you think of me?" Jesus could have come back at those disciples, especially the men, Peter and the rest, and said, "Shame on you! You should be ashamed of yourselves! The way you acted when I was praying and suffering and dying!" Oh, the disciples knew it to be true! They knew they had failed him. They had sinned greatly, and they certainly had no grounds to justify themselves. But Jesus mentioned none of that to them the Sunday he came back from the dead.

The first thing Jesus did was show himself alive to the women who came out to the tomb that morning. In particular, to Mary Magdalene, whose tears Jesus suddenly turned into surprise and joy. And through Mary Magdalene, Jesus had a message he wanted passed on to the men. Jesus told Mary, "*Go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'*" He called them *brothers*. How gracious of him. No mention of their failures, no hint about their sins. Those disciples were holy. They were sinless in the eyes of the Father. Just like their sisters in Christ were. After all, isn't that exactly what Jesus died for? And later that evening, when for the first time since his death and resurrection he came face to face again with his brothers, he said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said it again, "Peace be with you!"

So let's settle the main point of this sermon. Let's answer the question for those still asking it, especially for anyone here today who is divorced and wondering, "Jesus, what do you think of me?" *Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.* He's not ashamed to claim you. Not at all. As you step into church, as you confess your sins as a baptized child of God, as you come up for communion, as you leave church after the blessing, he's not ashamed to claim you. "That's my brother! That's my sister! We have the same Father, and we are family." Because by the grace of God, our brother, and our Lord, Jesus, tasted death for everyone. Amen.