

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany: Matthew 5:21-37

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Lord, I wish Jesus hadn't said that. This is one of those passages that has such good stuff to work with, and then Jesus goes on and says something that really makes me wince. Don't murder, that's fine enough. Don't get angry? I mean, that's an impossible task, but at least he paves a way forward. When you do, go and repair the breach. Don't swear an oath, just keep it simple. Maybe that's impossible, too, I don't know, but again, he gives us a way forward. But this whole divorce thing, dang, I wish he hadn't said that.

A few years ago, I was asked to draw up a family tree and go back only as far back as my grandparents. This was in a class, so other folks were doing the same thing, and the guy next to me showed up with his family tree on a post-it note. He was an only child, both his parents were only children, and the lines from one generation to the next on that post-it note were clear and easy. He didn't even put little boxes around the names or anything! His was so straight-forward, that it looked more like a grocery list than an exercise in genealogy.

Mine, on the other hand, was a bit more complicated. It spanned two sheets of printer paper turned sideways, and I'd carefully measured out person-by-person, generation by generation to get the spacing just right. This was one part compulsion, and one part necessity. I like my work to look neat. But also, if those sheets hadn't been neat, no one, myself included, could've followed it's convoluted contents.

Now, my mother's side of the family is the simpler of the two. Grandma and grandpa stayed married and had three kids. Of the three of them, two divorced and remarried. Of their offspring, that is, my generation, only one has been divorced. The other side is murkier. Grandma and grandpa got divorced, each remarried, grandma a couple of times, and they produced four kids. All four have been divorced and remarried, one of them three times. Their kids, my generation, already have three divorces and counting. Put another way, if you were to zoom way out and look at my family's patterns, you'll see only two first marriages that stayed married unto death. And truth be told, of those two, one of 'em probably shouldn't've.

I don't like divorce, not one bit, but I also know that sometimes, it's the only way forward for a myriad of reasons. But churches aren't always great at understanding that. The churches my family grew up in almost fetishized the idea of being married. Like, staying married was more important than acting like you were married. Maybe I'm not saying this quite right, so I'll give you a couple of examples, and I'll warn you, these examples are not about humanity at their best. My grandmother faced physical and emotional abuse at home, and a preacher who said that divorce was always a sin at church. When she finally got those divorce papers, she walked a hard road, often alone, abandoned by her church people. No one seemed to care that the marriage vows were broken; no one seemed to care about her welfare; all they were concerned with was her new and, in their eyes shameful, status as a divorcee. On the other side, my aunt who stayed married until death did them part, stayed married by God, come hell or high water, and in relationship terms, hell and high water both came. But she stayed married, and her church family would huddle around and tut about the hard life she led. But more than anything, they'd laud her for sticking through the hard times. It was holy, they'd say, holy suffering. This was her cross to bear. And she was their saint. As a preacher, both these stories make me sick, and as a family member, they make me want to chuck out the whole system and start over. What is so broken in our hearts that we'd uphold the system at the expense of the people trapped within it?

Now, we can't help but read scripture through the lenses of our own lives. I know this, and when I'm getting ready to step into this pulpit, I try to keep it in mind. My baggage ain't your baggage, thank God, and I need to try to step back. But when it comes to divorce, I'm afraid that too many of us carry the same baggage. So, when Jesus tosses around comments disparaging divorces and the women that go through them, I'm

guessing y'all's hackles went up just like mine. I wish I could make his words ok. I wish I could explain away this statement with some historical context. There are interpretations that make Jesus' words a little easier to swallow -- this may have been a way to correct men and protect women, believe it or not, that is to correct the powerful and protect the vulnerable -- and that helps a little, but for me, divorce, and Jesus' words about divorce still has its sting.

But I think my issue here is less with Jesus and his more generous take in context than it is with what people have done with his words. In other words, my frustration here is not with God, it's with us. It's with those folks that assumed they knew what was happening in my aunt's life. It's with those folks that felt like, because they suffered and stuck through the pain, others should too. It's with those folks that have great marriages with minor hiccups and assume that's what everyone else has, so those that get divorced really just weren't tough enough. And more than anything, my issue is with all those kinds of impulses that folks have that are then yoked to God, twisting what could've been a gesture of generosity into a means of control. To be clear, while I'd love for us to hold onto this generosity that Jesus may have intended, I'm not trying to say that divorce is a good thing. It's not. Divorce is always a tragedy, rather, that divorce needs to be an option, is a tragedy. It's evidence of deep brokenness in our world, of how that deep brokenness shows up even in what should be the most affectionate of spaces. Its implications ripple through families and friendships and livelihoods, and it arrives again and again across the timeline of one's life. Divorce is a nasty thing, and yet, when it comes with all its implications, it's not for us to shame. It is for us to love those that have lived through the tragedy. It is for us to hold them, to care for them, to remind them that the House of God is still open to them, maybe even especially now as they hurt, and later still as that hurt barely fades with the passage of time.

Look, I may take issue with how Jesus comes off to my twenty-first century ears here, but I also know that his message is bigger than a couple of verses. Jesus asks us not to get angry or to judge. He asks us to leave our pain at his altar and to drop our fear on his shoulders. He points us to God's unquestioning grace and the struggle to lift up the downtrodden. And he invites us always closer in. To a place where our questions are wanted. To a place where our worries are wanted. To a place, this place, where you, no matter who or what you are, where you are wanted.