

Sermon October 3 2021 Sarah Drummond

SCRIPTURE: Mark 10: 2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ He answered them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ They said, ‘Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, “God made them male and female.” “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

SERMON: “Assume Nothing” The Rev. Sarah Drummond

Good morning! It’s so nice to be with you in your beautiful town, your beautiful congregation, and your beautiful church.

I’d like to begin my message today with a special interactive quiz called “Is it a six, or is it a nine?” Who’s ready to play the game? (Several questions showing 6’s and 9’s right side up and upside down, within number strings, eg. 5 \_ 7, or 8 \_ 10.) You western Massachusetts people are wicked smaht! Because you don’t know if it’s a six or a nine in the absence of context. Today we’ll be talking about context.

Over the next few weeks, you are going to host a number of preachers, guest speakers and worship leaders who are part of Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School. Andover Newton is the school within a school at Yale that educates pastors, educates religious leaders for communities just like yours. And before all of our parade comes through, I thought you might be interested in hearing a little bit about what a person learns in divinity school, what a person learns in seminary.

The students that you will meet and the professors who will come are either teachers or learners in a program called the Master of Divinity program. Barbara Kershner in your congregation has a Master of Divinity from Andover Newton. And Brent Damrow, your pastor, has a Master of Divinity from Yale. The Master of Divinity is a 3-year program divided into four content areas. So a person earning a Master of Divinity studies Bible (Holy Scripture), Heritage (our history, our theology and our ethics in the Christian faith), Contextual Analysis, and Ministerial Practice.

Of those four, it wouldn't surprise me at all if the one where you're scratching your head is this whole idea of contextual analysis. What in the world is that? So glad you asked! Contextual Analysis means looking at the way Christianity gets lived out in different kinds of settings, whether those settings span the 2,000 years of the tradition or how they're situated in different parts of the world. For example, your deacon Michael Deegan was telling me this morning about a church that he visited where none of the liturgy was written down, and all the people knew all the words to everything. A different context.

We think about context the way we might imagine a vessel that holds water. The water is the Christian faith, and the shape of the vessel really matters. It really matters for the shape that the water might take. So when our faculty teaches our students about contextual analysis, we're looking at the lived experience of the faith depending on that which shapes the faith. And just like the 6 or the 9, we know that context changes everything.

The text from Mark that is appointed as today's gospel lesson is a real tough one. It's a difficult one. The first two sections of the appointed three-part reading are about divorce, the misery that is divorce. Some of you might have experienced divorce, and all of you know people who have gone through this incredibly difficult experience. Jesus is asked by those who are following Jesus, "Is it okay to get divorced?" And Jesus says no. Ouch. That is a really difficult thing to hear from our beloved Savior. So what we're going to do is consider that "no" in a context, in the context of ancient Israel, in the Bronze Era, where we find this teaching taking place. Here are some things that we need to know about that context.

One: Sexism in ancient Israel makes sexism today look like a joke. It was so incredibly sexist on every level as a culture. Am I saying they're bad people? Am I saying how horrible? No, it just is. It was a very sexist culture. One example of the sexism that is underlying Jesus' teachings is that women could not initiate divorce, and men could initiate divorce very easily. Another is that women could not be accused of adultery. If women were found to have been unfaithful to their spouse, remember that story in John about the rocks thrown at the adulteress? It was a crime that led some women to be put to death. Men would have dalliances. Women would have rocks thrown at them until they died. Very sexist culture. We can see Jesus starting to poke a little bit at some of those rules, even in the passage appointed today. If you look at the second of the two paragraphs in Mark, you see Jesus say that if a man commits adultery, then he's in big trouble. And if the woman commits adultery, she's in big trouble. Women didn't commit adultery in ancient Israel. So we see that Jesus is already pointing at a more egalitarian -- if incredibly harsh -- system, saying that he was on to the damage that could be caused by this incredibly unequal system of divorce. So that's the first contextual dimension that we need to keep in mind.

Two: Economic destitution was the most likely outcome for a woman whose husband divorced her. She couldn't go back to her parents. Maybe if she was really lucky she could get married again. But whatever resources she brought into the marriage stayed with the husband, who merely had to file a piece of paperwork to ruin her economically. Economic ruination led to poverty. And Jesus loved the poor.

Three: This is where I really start geeking out on this, so just buckle up. Jesus points to an Old Testament Biblical text when justifying his position. (Jesus didn't call it the Old Testament. The New Testament comes later. So for him, it was the Holy Book.) He had a choice between citing Deuteronomy, where we see laws about divorce, and citing Genesis, which is where we see fundamental concepts behind the nature of Creation. So Genesis is about creation, Deuteronomy is about rules and laws. He could have cited one or the other, and he went with Genesis. This signals something very important about the world Jesus is talking about when he offers his teaching. He's talking about the world as made known at the eschaton. Another thing we learn about at divinity school is theological concepts. For the theological concept that helps us to understand the theological framing that Jesus brings to the question he gets about divorce, we need to think about the eschaton (the end of times), the Kingdom come.

Jonathan Edwards was the pastor in this congregation. You've got to know that for people like me, that is amazing. That would be like going to the place in Liverpool where the Beatles sang for the first time. Jonathan Edwards in our tradition is a huge deal, not to be underestimated. If you haven't read George Marsden's "A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards" – it's in your church library – I strongly recommend that you check it out, because Jonathan Edwards' influence on what we now call the United Church of Christ's understanding of Christianity cannot be underestimated.

Let me tell you some things that Jonathan Edwards had to say about the eschaton. Eschatology is the study of the end of days. You know that expression, "I'm going to knock you to kingdom come"? Kingdom come meaning the end. I'm going to knock you out. I'm going to knock you to the very end of time. Kingdom come. The concept of the Kingdom which Jesus points to, and then other theologians over time have expanded, looks something like this. We're all living in one reality. And this reality where we live is broken and it's fallen. It's fallen because of Original Sin, also from Genesis. This world's pretty messed up. There's this other co-existent reality. That co-existent reality is perfection in God's imagination. It's overlaying on this fallen world right now. Our job as Christians is to try to make this fallen world look more like God's imagination would have it look, which is what we observe in that parallel universe that we now call the Kingdom of Heaven. Not heaven for after we die, but heaven as in finding a way to tap into that alternative universe where everything is really perfect.

St. Augustine was the first person who described those two realms. He described the City of Man – that's the broken one, and the City of God – which is the perfect one. Jonathan Edwards furthered that idea by saying that we get glimpses of that City of God when we see beauty in nature, when we see the in-breaking of the Spirit through art. And here he was in Stockbridge, which has so much great art now. So we've got to imagine his influence was pretty profound. It certainly has been profound on me and the way that I think about this perfect realm called the Kingdom.

For the purpose of this text about divorce, we need to take careful note of the fact that when Jesus was talking about the Kingdom of Man, he pointed to Deuteronomy. And when he was talking about the Kingdom of Heaven, he pointed at Genesis. What that says to us when we think critically about our text today is that Jesus was saying that in a perfect world certain things would go certain ways. And it was to the perfect world he was pointing when he talked about

divorce. When we read through these lenses, we can take away four different teachings from Jesus about divorce that really don't make any sense unless we look at the context.

One: It's not okay with Jesus that one sex has more rights than another sex. Even in his own day when that would have been an illegal and extremely unpopular position, Jesus took it. Jesus did not believe that one sex and another sex should have different rights.

Two: Jesus did not think it was okay to cause economic ruination to another person. He really cared deeply about poverty and its implications. Where the economic model of marriage would break down and leave one person destitute was something that Jesus cared about and Jesus rejected. We do not ruin other people economically.

Three: Jesus said that staying married after getting married is ideal. It is the ideal.

Four: Jesus tells us that the ideal is not always possible in this broken and fallen world.

In an even bigger picture, coming out of this text in Mark and looking at the whole of the Christian tradition, we can go further and say nothing in the Christian faith suggests that we are allowed to hurt one another at a whim and with impunity. Conversely, nothing in the Christian tradition suggests that when we are miserable, we're not supposed to do anything to fix it. God loves us. Our misery is not something that God would ever endorse.

So, what's the takeaway for us today? Is there a way that we can move from Jesus' world into our world, with something to take into the world with us today? I'm reminded of some teachings from my own parents. My sister Wendy is here with me today, and our parents were married for 57 years. And they knew a lot about marriage after 57 years. My father kept a newspaper clipping above his desk that said, "You never know what the other person is going through." My mother gave both my sister and me the advice before we got married that "Marriages only work if you don't expect life to be perfect." I'm not sure if she ever mentioned that to my dad. I'd add my own voice here to say "You don't even understand what's going on in your own marriage most of the time; who are you to pass judgment on the marriage choices of another?"

Context teaches us to assume nothing. Get curious about the context, rather than arrogant about what you think you know. And in all that you do, show compassion. The world is fallen and broken. We live in the Kingdom of Man that isn't yet knocking on the door even of the Kingdom of Heaven. If we're going to be in this City of Man and we're going to do our best, we really need each other's kindness and compassion more than anything else.

Jesus said, if we're going to make it we need to love one another. And it's in his name that I invite you to pray with me. Holy God, we thank you for Holy Scripture, and we thank you for opportunities to travel through time to know what our ancestors and even our Savior taught us, and teaches us even still today. God, we ask that you heal the broken places, and that you help us, with tenacity and determination, to chase after the Kingdom of Heaven. And with every opportunity we have, to make this world more closely resemble your imagination for us. And God, we also pray that you grant us acceptance that life isn't perfect, and that if all things were perfect, life would feel a lot different, and maybe we'd even be permitted to judge. But since it's

not perfect, since we're not perfect, we ask that you help us to find acceptance for our own foibles and flaws, and compassion and love for those who falter and fail from time to time. For tenacity, for acceptance, for love, O God, we ask for your generous gifts unto us. And if we might even be so bold as to ask for one more thing, we ask for grateful hearts, so that we might know that we are blessed, and that we have the privilege of on occasion being a blessing to others. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.