

“Getting Your Heart Back”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “GETTING BACK TO THE HEART OF WORSHIP”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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MARK 10: 2-16 NRSV

²Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

³He answered them, “What did Moses command you?”

⁴They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.”

⁵But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

¹⁰Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

Well, we have a lot to talk about don't we? We have our theme, “Getting Back to the Heart of Mission.” Then there is my topic for the day, “Getting Your Heart Back.” It's World Communion Sunday, we could talk about that. Do you suppose we could just ignore the Scripture lesson? I mean do we really have to talk about divorce and all that?

I don't pick these Scripture lessons. They are a sequence of Bible readings known as the Revised Common Lectionary. Bible scholars developed them so that, if we follow them over a three-year period, we will cover most of the Bible. Each Sunday there is an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, a Gospel Reading, and one from the epistles. I try to follow the lectionary as much as possible, so that you might hear a wide

variety of Scriptures rather than just my favorite ones. I also try to follow it as a discipline for myself so that I do have to wrestle with different passages, but there are some I would rather ignore. This would be one of those.

When I looked at the Gospel lessons for the next few weeks I was trying to find a basis in them for talking about mission. That is the theme I wanted us to spend time with. Instead I get divorce this Sunday, give away all your stuff to the poor next Sunday, who's the greatest the third Sunday and “your faith has made you well,” the fourth Sunday. I see inherent problems in every one of these. I don't think any of these are going to make you all want to vote me a raise any time soon. I have subtitled this series, “Things I Wish Jesus Hadn't Said.”

Scripture often says things we don't want to hear, though. But never let it be said that I didn't give it the old college try. I will try not to dance around this, and I also will try to see if there is more here than a condemnation of divorce. I hope to try to deal with this text and relate it to missions and to how it can point us in ways that will help us "Get our Heart Back." But let me be honest and admit that I do wish that Jesus hadn't said this.

Let me share with you just a little of the historical context and also our current cultural context. Let's start by saying you aren't going to hear me condemn anyone who is divorced or say that Jesus condemns people for divorce. What I hear is the difference between prescribing and describing. Jesus is not prescribing that we condemn those who divorce. Jesus describing are the consequences of the law according to Moses. In other words, if one lives by that law, if one divorces and then remarries then the law would consider that person an adulterer. I also hear Jesus moving to challenge us spiritually to recognize what God holds up as the essential quality for the kind of life God intends for us to experience.

Historically speaking, when we hear Jesus say, "Moses wrote this commandment for you," it is a bit misleading. Michael Turton says, "Moses never left a command on divorce." He points out that the passage on divorce in Deuteronomy, which is the only passage that Jesus could be referring to is in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. In it the wording assumes that divorce is a reality.

It actually deals with the rather unusual problem of a man who wants to remarry a wife he previously divorced and who married another and then was divorced. The passage says this would be detestable.¹

Jesus notes that all this is because of our hard-heartedness. I think that is accurate. We can be compassionate creatures but we can also be hard-hearted. As one person put it, "A person has her limits, you know. We are only human." I think that is right too. And I think it is important to recognize that Jesus is holding out the spiritual ideal for us to remember. It is an ideal of relationship and relationships are messy and seem to have little to do with "commandments." One can no more command relationships than one can legislate morality it seems to me. Even in our current culture churches that seem to "command" certain things in relationships don't do so well.

In our current culture the evangelical/fundamentalist churches used to condemn divorce and the Catholic Church still does not recognize divorce and remarriage. But the reality is that surveys show that they are not immune from it. George Barna found that about 35% of those who called themselves evangelical or fundamentalist believers were divorced and that is virtually the same percent in the culture around us believers and non-believers alike. By the way, the statistic that claimed 50% of marriages end in divorce is a misleading

¹ Michael Turton, "Historical Commentary on the Gospel of Mark," <http://www.michaelturton.com/Mark/GMark10.html#10.p.1.12>.

statistic. It ignores the marriages that are ongoing, that never go through divorce, and that the number of those who divorce and remarry often do so numerous times. That skews that statistic to make us think the situation is more dire than it is. But certainly 35% divorce is nothing to cheer about either.

When we turn to the spiritual dimension, beyond the legal side we can look at this more clearly. Andrew Warner, a UCC pastor in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, comments that Jesus quickly turned a legal debate into “a discussion of God’s intention for human relationship -- lifelong marriage.” He adds, “Note that Jesus took the question of divorce out of a legal context and moved it into the spiritual arena.”

He goes on to say that Adam and Eve are like a ‘Rorschach – test’ in relation to marriage. Jesus invites us to see what God intends for us in them. In other words, do we see it as a model that sets up the purpose of marriage as the continuance of human life? Then marriage is only for the purpose of having children. Do we see them as designed to be “complementary creations, representing the ‘necessity of biological difference?’” These are the theological arguments the Catholic Church and many evangelical and fundamentalist churches use.

He says that in his congregation they see Adam and Eve “as a sign that God’s purpose was companionship. Adam and Eve were together because ‘it is not good that humans should be alone.’ We see the intention of marriage not [just] procreation or biological

complementarity but as intimate companionship. But he adds, “marriage ... has a cruciform shape, ... and is a transformative experience for the two individuals. In marriage, God intends not only to alleviate human loneliness but to [bring about] human salvation.” He then says he is convinced that he and his partner experience “God’s intentions for us in marriage” bringing together both the transformative element as well as companionship.”²

So while Jesus was talking about the ideal, what God hopes for, we live in a world that is not ideal. Many people are not married, and many are divorced and some can not legally marry. How do we live in the real world, keep our eyes on the ideal, and yet make the best of life as we know it now? After all, we are human. We have our limits. It’s true our hearts are hard, they do break, we do fail at relationships and divorce can be a blessing in those times and it can be a curse, but it is not God who is cursing, it is the broken heart and the broken relationship itself. A broken heart is a curse, whether it is because of a divorce from another person or from God!

The message of this passage and of the whole Bible is that God intends us to be in relationship, both with others and with God. This passage is about marriage and divorce but it is also true in terms of relationships that are the foundation of our mission. We are called to do mission in order to be in relationship with those who are beyond our normal bounds. The outcast, the

² *The Christian Century*, October 3, 2006, copyright by the Christian Century Foundation.

sinner, the sick, and the lost are all people that we would rather ignore or reject rather than enter into relationship with them.

Our mission as Christians and the mission of the church is to enter into a compassionate relationship with others and especially with those who need. Yes, that might involve giving money to help them, but it also involves becoming connected to their pain and suffering. But look at why we do that, and what it does for us in return. We do it not only for their sake but because it will transform us. I think this is the most significant element we must realize if we want to get back to the heart of mission or get our heart back into a relationship with anyone – a spouse, a child, or anyone. We must be willing to connect with their pain and suffering. And we must realize we are not doing this only to bless them, but that it will bless us, because it will transform us. As we risk the first element of compassion – of “suffering with them” – their pain and suffering will transform them. I believe that is what Jesus meant when he invites us to take up our cross and follow him.

In an ideal world, yes, there would be no divorces from God or from others. But that doesn't change our mission or God's. The message of the Gospel is that God will not let that stop his purposes. God spares no effort to get our hearts back. I think the beginning of finding our heart, or of getting our hearts back is to know that God is working in every moment, in every relationship, in every aspect of life to get our hearts back to him. Sometimes the best way to do that

is to give your heart to someone in need. That's where you get back to the heart of mission. Maybe it's a good thing Jesus said this after all. AMEN.