

Oct 7, '18, Mark 10:2-16, Anthon UMC, "Family Matters"
Pastor Sheryl Ashley

On this World-wide communion Sunday where the Christians all over the world gather as one family at the communion table, I'm here to say, "Family Matters." Yes, it does... I think so and I'm pretty sure you all think too, no matter what shape or form of family you may have. So why do I get assigned a scripture preaching Jesus' statement on divorce on World Communion Sunday?!? Communion bonds us to one another in a sacred and holy way, while Divorce rips the very fabric of society and separates families and yet, here we are.... talking about them both on the same day.

. However, I tend to think there is a whole lot more to Jesus' words on divorce than just the blatant pronouncement of a judgment call concerning the parting ways in a marriage. Divorce in any form affects us all. The ripple of divorce spreads for generations. Who'd have ever thought when some of us stood up here and promised to stay together until death do us part, death of marriage could manifest itself in so many different ways?

Let's look at divorce on a broader God sized scale. If the world does not see itself as one human family, war breaks out that is a divorce of gigantic proportions. The same for breaking the relationship bonds of a country or a state or a town or a church family. I pretty much already preached about the importance of oneness last Sunday and the Sunday before....and here it is again. Makes me think God wants us to hear this and it's going to keep on being repeated until we get the full message.

Family is all about all relationships. Breaking a relationship God has blessed is always a kind of divorce between people that can happen between any of us, and that's a sin we all experience far too often as Jesus says, "Moses wrote this commandment on

divorce for you, due to the hardness of your hearts,” This scripture uses the example of marriage but I believe God sees us as families in all the areas of our lives, so we are in mortal danger of a kind of divorce when we do not take care of all our God given relationships with tender hearts.

I am thinking about what our former D.S., Tom Carver, used to say at almost every gathering in which he was speaking. He would say, “Relationships are everything.” Jesus, who created us to be families must rejoice hearing that. And then at my own recent yearly interview with our new D.S., Ron Carlson, I, along with all other pastors, was handed a booklet entitled, “Me Too” taking conversation from the “Me Too” movement that has come into public acclaim, from women who have suffered abuse at the hands of controlling men are increasingly speaking up. This publication, given to pastors is filled with instructions of how to deal with situations that may come up in their ministry or their churches concerning such abuse. Our current D.S, who seems a bit of a rebel said to me, “I’m not asking you to do a study on this booklet specifically, but I am telling my pastors to remember this rule: “If it doesn’t belong to you, don’t touch it.” I smiled a bit at that remark, but he repeated his simple wisdom with a serious face, “It works,” he said, “If it doesn’t belong to you, don’t touch it.” I’ve been thinking that a whole lot of sin could be avoided by obeying this simple wise rule.

In our Gospel reading of the morning, we find that Jesus, with all his words of simple wisdom is embroiled in a very controversial issue of the day concerning divorce. The Pharisees hope to trap Jesus into taking sides between the teaching of two leading Rabbi’s of his time who hold differing opinions about divorce. They may even hope to get the people riled up against Jesus with the same results as John the Baptist got

when he came out negatively and lost his head in the issue of King Herod's divorce and Harrod's marrying his brother's wife. And because divorce is so common today, risking your neck is how we preachers feel when reading this harsh Scripture on divorce as it comes up in lectionary and we are to preach it. I'd rather not get my head taken off. But here it is before us to hear and heed. Family matters! Relationships are everything. Hardness of heart is not God's will for His family.

Family matters and Jesus was part of the Jewish family, -- a strong family culture, but the leaders did not claim him as a son of theirs because he opposed them too often, kind of like in a marriage where both parties see no compromise about certain issues. They are always out to show the other where they are wrong. And so, the Pharisees are again faking it when they come to Jesus, pretending that they have some question or other that they actually want his opinion on. They don't want his opinion, they want to show him where he is wrong and expose him as a fake, like two badly fitted marriage partners at odds.

There were two schools of thought in the Jewish world of that time: one leading rabbi taught that divorce was only permissible in the case of infidelity; another allowed just about any reason for divorce, including poor cooking. And the Jewish religious law allowed only a man to divorce; a woman did not have that right, and in a pretty simple manner – just write her a letter of dismissal. So, the Pharisees challenged Jesus to offer a clear teaching on this very sensitive matter, thinking no matter what his opinion was, they could get half the crowd angry enough to take him down.

Kind of like today's political system getting Judge Kavanaugh, nominated for the position of Supreme Court Justice, to speak about such issues such as everything he'd

ever done since age 17 and getting Dr Ford, as a witness against Kavanaugh, to exercising her right to speak up on a “Me Too” issue about her abuse, and then getting the FBI sent in to find out the truth and examine everyone involved. Not finding the evidence to shut down the nomination, Judge Kavanaugh got affirmed by the Senate yesterday. But what a rough couple of weeks for all of us sorting through the muck and the mire of those relationships...half for and half against the outcome.

After that you just know every relationship inside and outside the political arena is going to get injured and rioting is going to reign destruction upon all within its reach. We are hereby divorced from living in peace and harmony...the things the Bible says our relationships are to live in. Someone is going down and some others will rejoice winning for now, but it is a rare case when relationships in the political family come out on top for long.

Family matters, yesterday and today, and coming out on certain controversial issues, no matter how much you explain your point these days, can take you down with about ½ of the people on one side or the other. In a way we are in the process of divorcing one another as a country, rather than learning to live in peace.

Jesus spoke right up about divorce as he had no choice. Jewish leadership put him on the stand hoping to trap him with an answer to this burning question to which they thought they already had the politically correct answer. In Jesus’ culture, Jewish men ruled! So, Jesus, quoted the ancient teaching of Moses, that a man was permitted to divorce his wife. But Jesus went deeper into the subject, giving its true meaning. “Moses was just allowing for your hardness of heart,” Jesus said. When we read God original intention for marriage in Genesis, we know that God’s intention is: “A man shall

leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

Jesus outlines the intent of marriage in the first place; What were once two separate individuals now become “one flesh” – two persons joined together as one unit by God who designed them to fit together emotionally, physically and spiritually. As God’s own nature is 3 in 1, so too is the nature of human relationships: husband and wife, and later children, all become one family and one flesh, reflecting the image of God in which they were created to be from the beginning. What a high reaching image that is! How can we do it?

I’ve read that 25% of adults in the U.S. have been divorced. And I know plenty of U.M. Pastors who have been divorced. None of us stand perfectly grounded in God.

Jesus empowers women as well as men in this teaching as he says if either one divorces and remarries they commit adultery. Ouch! But wait...a minute, let’s not stop reading there. This Scripture sounds pretty black and white on this matter if we just take it on its own and ignore the other teachings of Jesus, about a loving God desiring us to live in peace and harmony with one another, in all relationships. The legal language of divorce is all about separation. The language of love is always about bonding.

Relationships are everything. But sometimes not every relationship can be saved and our oneness gets shattered. And that is where forgiveness is key to repairing our world and our relationships and starting anew with a new heart for God.

Family matters. Our family circle widens every time we are placed in a new situation or a new group. Some people have no family support systems and it is our responsibility as Christians to widen our circle to include them. As a family it’s our

responsibility to put another leaf in our family tables which belong to Jesus Christ and over which he is head and make room for all.

Family matters. This Mark Scripture continues as Jesus tells the disciples to stop ordering the children away from him as if they were nothing. and takes them up in his arms, lays his hands upon them and blesses them. He is showing them and us that his idea of family is a wider circle than we ever imagined and it includes the weakest and those most in need of family support.

On this communion Sunday in which we are reenacting and remembering that Jesus sat with his family of disciples and shared with them the elements which foretold that they mattered so much to Jesus that he was willing to die for this family, in which we all around the world who claim the name of Jesus are a part.

The Communion table is a place of forgiveness to which we are all invited to come. Jesus' love is stronger than sin. It has the power to restore and rebuild lives for all who claim Christ as Lord and Savior, not just the young or the old, not the strong or the weak, not the divorced, the married or the single. It is the love of God that melts the hardness of all hearts, joins us as one family and produces eternal relationships where we don't have to fake anything, because at God's table, family matters...and those relationships include you and me and our Christian sisters and brothers all around the world!