

Faith and Divorce
St. Mary's and Holy Trinity
October 6th, 2024

Faithful and loving God, may only the truth be spoken and only the truth heard. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My dad is a saddle maker. Which means that I grew up doing leather work. I love leather. Leather is a perfect metaphor for what our hearts should be like. One of the promises of God is to take our hard hearts of stone and turn them to hearts of flesh. The thing about leather is that it's made of flesh, and that makes it as soft as it is strong. It's not mighty like stone. But it's *really* hard to break. If you take a hammer to a piece of leather, it leaves a mark, but it won't break. If you take a hammer to a slab of stone, it will shatter. Hearts are the same way.

Whether we're talking about our relationship with God, our relationship with our neighbours, ourselves, *or our relationship with our spouses*, hard hearts break things and are easily broken. But soft and strong hearts can flex and give and hold together with whatever they are joined to.

I have to speak to Jesus' teaching on divorce. But I'll say right away, that you won't get do's and don'ts from me in a ten-minute sermon. Life is complex and messy. So, morality is complex and messy. What I *will* talk about is the spiritual attitude *necessary* for any marriage to work, and it is the same spiritual attitude *necessary* for our relationship with God to work. It's a soft but strong heart.

The Pharisees come to Jesus to test him. They ask about divorce. Here's the first thing to notice. Marriage and divorce are favourite subjects for controversy. But this is our *lives* we're taking about. So Jesus sort-of plays along with the Pharisees, while gently pointing them back to

real life rather than legal puzzles about morality. Moses' law granted divorce under circumstances. Jesus grants that. Basically, if one's spouse is breaking their vows in the form of betrayal or abuse or neglect, then divorce is warranted for the person who needs to be freed. But Jesus isn't as interested in legal subtleties as we are. He's interested in the heart of the matter.

For Jesus, the matter at hand is the way God made life on earth. Jesus wants us to think about being these creatures of God in this creation, as men and women and the like. We are created for relationship. Relationship first with God. Then relationship with each other. Before God joins people together in marriage, or any relationship, God joins us to himself. From the first breath of life on earth, the story of humanity and creation and God is a story of faith kept or faith broken. The story of the earth is God's unshakable faithfulness to be forever joined to humanity, even when we reject him and forget him and hate him. So, Jesus puts the question of divorce in the whole context of life on earth as a story of faith kept or broken.

Then notice this. He is Jesus, remember. He is God and humanity *joined together* in one person. His body is the marriage of divinity and humanity. And as he speaks to the heart of the matter about divorce, he says: "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate." Here God is in Jesus, so faithful to humanity, that he has become one of us. This isn't just about marriage. It's about every form of faithfulness as an echo of God's faithfulness to humanity.

Jesus then talks to his disciples in private. He says plainly and bluntly, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Take note that the adultery Jesus is talking about is just plain old cheating in the form of leaving your spouse for another. Also, it was once

believed that only wives could commit adultery, while husbands had free license. But for Jesus, husbands and wives must be equally faithful.

But Jesus doesn't say much more. And part of the reason this passage feels like sandpaper on soft skin is that it paints such broad strokes about divorce as adultery, that it feels callous to the complex and messy struggles of life.

But the struggle of life in general is just what we need to be mindful of. Struggle in life and in marriage should never come as a surprise. Life is hard. It's good and it tends toward joy when lived rightly. But life is *hard*. We have this picture of Job who remains faithful to God despite everything in his life being taken from him, including his health. He doesn't curse God because he doesn't expect only easy things in life. Suffering is part of it. The Hebrews passage today talks about Jesus as the founder or pioneer of faith specifically through his sufferings. He fully shares in our human flesh and blood and the trials that come with that, because suffering just comes with being human.

I started out talking about soft and strong hearts, because that is the spiritual attitude necessary for us to live a life on earth without breaking. It's the very attitude that our Creator has toward us. God was willing to let his faithfulness to humanity take him in a direction that in some sense changed God forever. The Creator was willing to become human and to go to the cross to be near to us and love us at all costs. If our marriages are going to work, we have to be prepared for them to change us forever. We can't expect marriage to always suit who we already are or who we dream ourselves to be. That said, while God is willing to accept our abuse and cheating of him, God is not willing to accept our abuse and cheating of each other, and sometimes a person just needs to get free.

We have no control over whether our loved ones will be faithful to us. We hardly have control over whether we can have a soft heart ourselves. But we can ask God to take our own hearts of stone and make them hearts of flesh – soft and strong. The heart of flesh is like leather. It bends and gives and changes over time, as it gets hammered and stretched by the trials of life.

Other than this, I have nothing better to say than what a marriage counsellor can say. There are professionals out there. There are good books on the subject. You can get your dos and don'ts from someone who knows better.

But before any of that we need the gift of a soft heart. May we receive the healing grace of Jesus, and let him change us, as he was willing to be changed forever to be with us.

Amen.