

*It's a Marriage. It's Personal*

Lessons: Matthew 5:27-32

Whether in drama or daytime soap opera, in commentary or comedy, marriage and family, romance and sex are dominating themes on television and a topic in our everyday lives. Don't you wonder why we seldom hear about marriage in worship?

There are several factors. A one hour television program contains only 40 minutes of content. A sermon is half as long in an hour of worship, and people are usually paying more attention to the television than to a sermon. No wonder worship is a place where preachers sometimes avoid unpleasant, complicated, or difficult subjects. Marriage in sacred space is a sensitive subject.

Then there is that strange reason. We don't like to hear about some subjects like money or marriage in church. The gospels have a lot more talk about money from Jesus than marriage, but the instructions Jesus gives to followers in the Sermon on the Mount talk of both. We avoid money talk sometimes because the topic is too easy to understand. Jesus' words are sometimes *not* easy to understand, - especially these commands about marriage and divorce.

So, I'm going to let you off the hook today and not talk about what Jesus says we should be doing with our money. Instead, let's have some honest and hopefully helpful conversation about a topic that most all of us have somewhere in our family histories: marriages and divorces. Most all of our families have divorces on more than one of the branches of the family tree. We look simplistically at the words of Jesus and think they are pretty irrelevant to the realities that cause marriages to break up.

But before we skip right over what Jesus says, let's look at his words in his world to see if there is some help for us in our world of marriage troubles. First, Jesus is not giving general marriage counseling here. He is talking about a more specific problem that plagued the first century - adultery!

By the letter of Jewish law, adultery happened when a man had sex with a married woman. He violated another man's property, because a married woman belonged to someone else. Laws against adultery were about regulating sexual behavior. A man could have "casual sex" with an unmarried woman, and stand in the synagogue without guilt. Women were guilty of adultery anytime they violated their place as the property of a man. And since unmarried women were property-in-waiting, the law regulated their sexual behavior differently.

Jesus goes back behind these legal licenses to the relational character of the "Big 10" – and the commandment against adultery. The old way to see the command was if a man had not broken the letter of the Law, he could do what he wanted. Jesus says it's not what is legal in doing, it's what is moral in the willing of the heart. The law is not about behaviors that are allowed or prohibited. The law is about "loving the neighbor." Women were not property, they are "neighbors" – people we are commanded to honor with love and justice.

Jesus is not talking to women. He tells men that they commit adultery against their wives when they look at another woman in a way that would violate their vow of faithfulness to their wives. Jesus says that the law not simply about limiting sexual behavior. Men should go way

beyond the law's limits and honor the vows they make to their wives. Jesus says that men bear the greater responsibility, because they have greater power and greater freedom.

Today, Jesus says that it is not about letters and laws. Adultery is a sin - one of the Big 10 - because we deny a person's value and use them as an object for our selfish desire. We commit adultery whenever a person we vowed to love becomes some-thing to make us happy.

The law against adultery is also a command to honor marriage. Vows made by people are between people. It's a marriage. It's not legal. It's personal.

I know the truth may shock you, but this problem among men still persists today. And in the new world of equal rights and equal responsibilities, women seemed to have joined the great tradition of violating vows, of "making moves" on married people. Now women have more power and freedom, and more responsibility. So what Jesus says to men then, applies more – and equally – to women now.

The real problem is adultery - using someone else and turning them into an object for self-centered satisfaction.

Jesus is talking about honoring sacred vows, and there is nothing between the first century and now that makes his words about marriage vows irrelevant. Let's talk about vows - marriage vows.

Some people take these vows very seriously, and some write their own. And some go into marriage without listening to the vows at all. Marriage is the place that exposes self-centeredness more clearly than any other, because it is the nature of marriage vows to deny self-centeredness.

I have always told couples who call the church that I am not interested in their wedding. A 30 minute ceremony does not do a lot to make a marriage. There is no magic in stained glass, a center aisle, flowers, candles and mentioning God in there somewhere.

I'm interested in their marriage - and I have very particular interest because of the limits that my vows have put around the kind of marriage vows I am ordained to bless.

In the church - where Jesus makes us take vows to follow him as Lord and trust his way in our living - we do not get to do anything on our own terms. So why would we think that we could write our own vows? In the church, you don't get married for what you get out of it.

In the church, a marriage is NOT a contract. America has the highest failure rate for marriage in the world because we are essentially the most self-centered culture in the world. We are in most anything for what we get out of it in everything. We make contracts for what we have to give for what we hope to get. Why would marriage be any different? We use people as means to an end, as objects for what we can get. When both people get what they want, it's a good marriage. That is what we too often mean by "traditional family values." And it usually means one party in the contract gets more of what they want than the other does. "We took a vow: I get the better and you get the worse."

In the church, a marriage is a COVENANT, like God makes with God's people. God makes

an unconditional covenant from God's side, and says that the only thing that can break it is a break from the other side. "If you will be my people..." But I will always be your God. And here is the sad truth: the divorce rate for people who call themselves "Christian" is the same as for the people who don't. There is no magic in stained glass. It's deeper than a ceremony and a license. It's a marriage. It's personal. It's a personal commitment to another person.

Marriage is a place where we can learn about God's love best, because someone loves us and we love someone in a way that makes God's love for us real.

Marriage is a relationship, not an arrangement. Commitments are never circumstantial, never clear-cut, never really specific, because vows are not based on limits. Vows are a FACT of commitment to a person, and a PROMISE of what life can be together that is greater than life putting ourselves first. It is the PROMISE in the FACT that drives the commitment, and the promise is for the sake of the other.

It's a marriage. It's personal. It's two persons willing to live for the sake of the other, and trying best they can to place the other person's needs and dreams above their own. It is about finding the deeper measure of meaning in seeing the other person grow, and discovering that other person spends most days working at the same task to the opposite end.

So where does divorce fit in all this talk about vows and forever?

I always remember being in a Continuing Education week on Marriage Preparation. One of the skilled marriage counselors was explaining that "divorce is like a death," and was using the stages of grief to help us see how people walk through life after divorce. One of the participants raised her hand, and said, "Divorce is not like death at all. The jerk is still alive, but I get to live with him a way I can live with him."

The spiritual truth is that the vows are for forever. We are tied to the other person by vow and history even when the promises are broken and lost. We don't go back and erase the past, but we get to live with it differently. It is like, ...well living with our sins differently when we have been forgiven. Divorce gives us a way to live with the FACT of forever in the vows, when there is no PROMISE left in the relationship. Divorce gives us a way to turn toward a new promise at an intersection in the road when we see the sign that says "Dead End."

Divorce is easy when people have a Contract Marriage, but for the people in the marriage who made covenant vows, the end of a marriage is heart-breaking. We second-guess and what-if, and we have a hard time separating our regrets from our guilts.

Let's be honest. Jesus is right. The only good reason for a divorce is when someone has committed spiritual adultery - turned a relationship of commitment to a person into object for self-centeredness needs. Let's be honest. Divorce is the tragic admission that there isn't much living for the sake of each other left in a relationship because vows have not been lived - generally by one person more than the other.

Divorce gives us a chance to put some measure of PROMISE back into our lives when we don't see any PROMISE left in the vows of a marriage. Redeeming life after the failure of a marriage is never easy and always costly. But divorce is redeeming when living in a marriage is more costly.

The real thing to say here is that God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world, but to save it. Christ is working in the world to turn us toward the love he shows that is the love we are supposed to live, and to find our lives in marriages that work at that kind of love.

Following Christ never has a “Dead End” sign at any intersection. When we know there is a Dead End in a marriage, we turn and take the other path, and thank God there is another path where Christ is still walking in front of us.

So, what Jesus is saying today is not that much different from the lessons to followers in a time long ago. The depth of life is found in the deeper places of commitment and vow and selflessness. Life is relationship, so marriage is always and only personal. Vows are unconditional commitment to love another person the way that Christ loves us. That is the summary of all the marriage counseling I have been able to give to any couple.

Marriage is an experiment in living Christ's love for another person. Life is the same experiment, so marriage can be a kind of laboratory for learning where love is catalyst in all the decisions of all our living with a person who loves us, too.

We find our lives and our purpose and our meaning in the vows that we take to submit to Christ's will in all our living. And even in the imperfect and incomplete ways we work at life or at marriage, we see more life and joy in that living when we celebrate the gift of love that Christ gives us to overflowing, and we share that love with others – especially the one we marry and hold as a gift Christ has given to us.