

BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER

Job 1:1; 2:1-10
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

A faculty member at the Babcock Graduate School of Management at Wake Forest University said that the most disturbing thing to him about the students who came there for their M.B.A. was that they accepted government regulations as the cost of doing business and were willing to comply with what was required of them but did not see any ethical issues beyond that.

For those students, legality and ethics were the same. What does the law allow? What does the law require? If it is not required, they don't have to do it. They can do whatever they want.

Not so very different from the Pharisees who asked Jesus, *Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?* What does the law allow? What does the law require? *What did Moses command you?* Jesus asked them.

Moses allowed a husband to write a certificate of divorce and to put her away.

For your hardness of heart Moses wrote you this commandment, Jesus said.

For your hardness of heart.

What does the law allow? What does the law require? The concern for legality reveals an inclination to do no more than is required, the least one can get by with — to give as little as possible in order to get as much as possible. To see legality as the extent of ethics shows only hardness of heart.

For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce. That's legal. And that is not the real issue.

Jesus turned the question around. Rather than talking about divorce, Jesus talked about marriage.

The real issue is what does God intend.

From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason..., the two shall become one flesh.

God intends human unity. God intends community (even if with only one other person). The unity of human beings is God-given, God-created (whether in marriage or any other human community). We did not create it. We only have to recognize it. That is what God intends.

What God has joined together, let no one separate (put asunder, in the old language of the marriage ceremony).

The law of the Pharisees allowed for divorce, and Jesus spoke with the disciples in private about the reality of divorce.

And that reality is that every divorce involves sin. The gospel of Mark says it. Our own Reformed tradition says it. And I can tell you from personal experience it is true.

I think we have made the mistake of oversimplifying by defining divorce as the primary sin.

The primary sin is the breakdown of the relationship, the breakdown of the God-intended unity of the relationship, the rupture of the God-intended community. **That** is the hardness of heart. **That** is the separating, the putting asunder of what God has joined together.

WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER — 2

Divorce recognizes that fundamental rupture of God's intention and expresses the opinion that the hardness of the human heart has made the breakdown irreparable. It seeks to end the pain of the rupture, perhaps to find healing in a healthy relationship. Unable to make a good marriage, it refuses to settle for a bad one.

The primary sin is the breakdown of the relationship. And that breakdown can be found even in marriages that do not end in divorce. That does not make it any less a sin.

The way the poet Robert Creeley described it was: *the last he died with and gave up loving and lived with her.* [Robert Creeley, *Marriage, for Love*]

To remain in a broken marriage, a broken relationship, not because one believes the relationship to be reparable but for other reasons, like security (financial or otherwise) or fear of being alone or habit or the children or fear of what others will say shows as much hardness of heart. And offers no more hope.

And so we struggle with God's intention for creation, for us — and with the reality of life as we find it to be.

The temptation is strong to look to the legal standard (What does the law allow?) to justify our falling short of God's intention, to find in Scripture what the Pharisees found — a clear, objective standard whose legal boundaries we have not crossed.

That is self-righteousness, which is self-deceiving. It defines us over against the law and apart from God, which reveals the breakdown of our relationship with God.

What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.

Divorce is just one manifestation of what we put asunder.

We see nation separated from nation, nation separated from within. We see race separated from race, religion from religion, denomination from denomination. We see poor separated from rich with the privileged protecting their status by their willingness to alleviate the results of poverty and not to attack the causes of poverty, as if the problem could be solved without some surrendering of privilege. We see the tortured soul unable to find peace within itself. We see brokenness in the whole of humanity.

And finally we see the body of Christ broken, dismembered by the hardness of the human heart.

What God has joined together, let no one separate.

It is fitting, the writer of Hebrews says, that God should make the pioneer of our salvation perfect in suffering.

Christ Jesus our Savior [**Soter** in the Greek, which means the one who heals, who makes whole — the one who puts back together what human beings have separated, have put asunder].

The crucifixion tore his body asunder, dismembered it. The resurrection put his body together, made it whole — re-membered it.

And the crucifixion and resurrection make us whole.

And we are invited to the Table — to eat, to drink, to re-member.

We are invited together with divorced spouse, rebellious child, estranged friend (who has disappointed us, hurt us, at whom we are angry), rich and poor, Israeli and Palestinian, Republican and Democrat, gay and straight, red and yellow, black and white.

WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER — 3

In the movie *Places in the Heart*, a woman whose sheriff husband is killed in a shooting accident has to struggle to make a living. She has to try to scratch out a living, growing cotton on poor land. Under pressure from the banker who tries to get her to sell her land before the bank forecloses, she takes in a boarder, who is the blind brother-in-law the banker wants out from under his roof, and hires a hand to help, who is black and attacked by klansmen. Her judgmental sister is married to man who is unfaithful.

The final scene of the movie is set in church, a worship service in which communion is served. The camera follows the tray as it is passed. The woman is there. Her sister and her husband are there. The blind man is there and the banker. Her husband and the young man who shot him. The hired hand and the klansmen are there. Not as they were. As they shall be with painful barriers removed.

We will pray **our** Father. And they are included just as we are included. The way Walt Whitman said it was: *Not til the sun excludes you do I exclude you.* [Walt Whitman, *To a Common Prostitute*]

We are invited together because our Savior (our Soter), who heals us, who makes us whole, joins us together with those whom we separated from us.

We eat and drink to re-member the body of Christ, which the hardness of the human heart dismembered.

We do not have to create human unity. We only have to recognize it. God's intention in creation is that we be one.

Let no one separate what God has joined together.