

Kent United Church of Christ
Sermon by the Rev. David Pattee, senior pastor
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Love and Marriage, Gay and Otherwise
Genesis 2: 18-24, Mark 10: 2-9

As the scripture was being read -- first from Genesis and the story of the woman created as a helpmate for the man, next from Mark, Jesus' teaching on divorce -- I could sense more than a little discomfort in the room, and could see on a few of your faces some real misgiving about where this service might be headed. Hang in there, it may get worse before it gets better.

Every one of us has been affected by the painful reality of divorce in our families and close personal relationships, in our community and circle of friends. It's uncomfortable and hard to talk about. Jesus' teaching about divorce often causes confusion and trouble -- and for that reason, many folks will conveniently avoid and ignore it.

We need to understand Jesus' words against the background of laws concerning divorce in his day. In the traditional Jewish community, men were the only ones who really had the option to divorce. Women, by-and-large did not have the legal or economic means to separate from their husbands, but husbands could get rid of their wives. Being divorced from a man, who was almost always the more powerful member of the partnership, a woman had no real claim on the "marital assets" and her former husband had no continuing responsibility for her welfare. She would do well if her family got any remainder of the dowry back. Thus, Jesus' words, which sound harsh and restrictive to our ears, should be understood as supportive and encouraging to women in his day.

The Pharisees were testing Jesus with a legal question, probably in the hope of getting him to say something politically incorrect. This new idea that we find in Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees, the notion that a woman might have rights in a marriage and protections in a divorce, is a dispute arising out of Jewish contact with Greek culture, and the status of women in Roman law. Politically, the Pharisees aren't really asking Jesus a question about divorce or marriage, faithfulness or righteousness. They're trying to get him to say something that makes it sound as if he's sympathetic to the foreign colonizers of Israel. They're trying to bait him in their culture wars, trick him into giving up a sound bite that they can use to make him seem unpatriotic.

And what we find here is what we see throughout the Gospels: Jesus answers arguments about legal issues with his witness to the truth of God's love as the substance of all faithful relationships. Over and over, with regard to money and charity, food, sex, children, family, religion and ritual purity, the law matters, but not as an end in itself; the law is meant as a guide to and servant of loving relationships. And it's the quality of the relationships that matters.

It is so important to pay attention to how and where Jesus locates his response to the Pharisees. Jesus answers them first by pointing to the law. He asks, "What did Moses command?" That is, what does the law say? And they report what is written in Deuteronomy: the provision for a legal divorce. Jesus acknowledges that the Mosaic Law did permit divorce, but only because of the "hardness of heart" of the people.

Jesus says that the law regulates their hard hearts, and then he puts Scripture in conversation with Scripture, pointing to a time before the law, the ideal of God's intention expressed in Genesis, for two people to be faithful, lifelong companions in an intimate, committed relationship that should not be severed. The Pharisees ask about divorce and Jesus changes the subject to the nature of marriage.

The message here is Jesus saying to those in his time, in our time, and in all time, that people are more than bodies, relationships are more than mere convenience, real love is never casual, and

human beings are not disposable. Of course it's all a lot more complicated than that, but finally it isn't -- that's the bottom line.

The lure of evil is to choose things, to objectify reality, to reduce it to the rules, to define your existence by stuff, by your convenience and your consumption, your conformity to the standards of your class. And usually there's nothing wrong with the stuff -- the house, the car, the career, the beautiful partner, sex, wealth, class, the admiration of others. There's nothing necessarily wrong with any of that stuff. But the stuff is not the point. Finally, it's not the stuff that really hurts you or helps you. It's what you do with it. God call us to build creative personal and community relationships. And the only glue that will hold together all the stuff of those relationships is love.

In today's reading from the Book of Genesis, we encounter the first "not good" in the Bible. The voice of God judges that it is "not good" for the man to be alone. So God set about making other creatures: beasts of the field, birds of the air, and all the cattle. But none was a fit companion. So God caused the man to sleep and removed one of his ribs. From that body and bone, the elements of flesh, God shaped a new expression of humanity: the woman. And seeing her, the man said, "Finally, bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." At last there was a fit companion, a dialogue, a relationship through which humanity might be fulfilled. At last, creation was complete.

It's not the idea of sexuality that's new in the story. That's covered in the previously created species. What's new here is the idea of mutuality and spirituality in relationship without which the human is incomplete.

It is not good that we should be alone. From our very beginnings, God saw that human being was meant for togetherness. The image of God is a creation of love which cannot prosper in isolation: love becomes life only in creation with another who cares and shares; love becomes real only when there is someone else who gives and receives and passes on that gift in the multiplication of life.

Not just any old creature will do. Birds and beasts and cattle -- all life has its place in the order of things -- but the fulfillment of human being requires a true peer, a trusted colleague, a respected friend made from the same stuff -- a companion in the source, the struggle, the vision and the pleasure of love -- a partner in the sacred work of creativity.

God's work is not done until there is life together. Our creation is not complete until it is shared. Too often we get so wrapped up in our scheming attempts to command and possess life that we lose the beauty of this simple truth: the best of it is sharing our togetherness, naked and unashamed, united by our respect and trust in the eternity of God's love.

Perhaps you have heard the ridiculous attacking expression, "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." On this Sunday of the March for Equal Rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender folk, I think we really need to call that abuse of the story into question. This passage shows God working with the first human to find a helper and partner. God does not direct who the partner will be. God instead offers Adam innumerable choices in which he did not find "a helper as his partner" until God presented the new creation of a "one flesh" partner, the woman, who awakened Adam's delight. "This at last is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh."

When we love those who awaken our delight, we follow Adam's and God's original example. It is not good for us to be alone, so we work with God toward relationships that awaken our delight in the life that God has given into our care.

There is so much talk in our country about family values and the defense of marriage, but so often the talk seems to miss the point that marriage and family and home are about much more than the

law; and over and over again Jesus teaches us that the law is meant to be guide and servant to the loving quality of our relationships.

Marriage is not under attack by gay people who want to build loving homes in community with equal protection for their partnership. That argument is just a cover for prejudice and fear. The neighborhood isn't going down because of the people who want to move in, it's going to hell because of the people who sell out. Statistically, the highest rate of divorce in the United States is in the so-called Bible Belt and, among those who identify as Christians, the highest rate of divorce is among those who describe themselves as "fundamentalist." Perhaps we should have a constitutional amendment prohibiting them from marrying because, you see, it turns out that reducing a relationship to a self-righteous reading of the rules doesn't really promote faithfulness and health in partnership. Marriage is about so much more than the law.

God's work is not done until there is life together. Our creation is not complete until it is shared. So let us work together with God toward relationships that awaken our delight in this life and our creativity in love and marriage, gay and otherwise.

To glory of God. Amen.