

“...but the Bible Says...”

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 8 October 2006

Mark 10.2–16

I'd like to take a brief, informal poll: by a show of hands, how many of you have been divorced, had a parent who was divorced, had a son or daughter, a brother or sister who was divorced?

I don't think that this is dramatically different than what you would see in most evangelical churches. In fact, Baptists have the highest divorce rate among any Christian denomination...and nondenominationalists had an even higher rate!¹ But Lutherans (undoubtedly inspired by Garrison Keillor and Pastor Ingquist) had the lowest rate of divorce.

Now, don't you find it odd that some of the people who howl the loudest that “gays and lesbians are threatening the institution of marriage” are some of the Christians most likely to get divorced? If we *really* think that marriage is the most important issue we face today...if we *really* think that we ought to preserve the “sanctity” of marriage...if we *really* want to remove things that are a threat to the institution of marriage, then why do Christians (except Catholics) pay so little attention to divorce?

I find it fascinating that Mark's gospel actually records Jesus prohibiting divorce...and that most Christians essentially ignore this injunction. How can anyone who claims to take the Bible literally accept that divorce is a viable option? I'd also like to remind you that the Bible does not have one single word from Jesus regarding same-sex marriage or prohibiting homosexuality.

Our culture has changed. Divorce is never a desirable or pleasant thing, but sometimes it is the best option for the two partners who have come to a decision to end their marriage. Divorce has become acceptable to most Christians, but this was not always the case. And I cannot tell you how painful it is for many Roman Catholics who have been divorced and remarried to be barred from the communion table.

The Irish Constitution of 1937 says, “No law shall be enacted providing for the grant of a dissolution of marriage.” This isn't surprising for a country that paid close attention to Catholic teaching in its lawmaking. That particular article was not overturned until 1995.

In our own Congregational bailiwick, “In 1639, while England still ruled marriage indissoluble [except for royalty] the Plymouth Colony granted the first divorce on the new continent, and in the next 60 years the Massachusetts Bay Colony recorded 44 more.”² Keep in mind that Massachusetts Bay in the 17th century was a Puritan theocracy.

It should also be said that neither Jesus nor the apostle Paul were “pro-family” or “pro-marriage” in our sense of those terms. Listen to the way Jesus essentially disavows his family, as they show up among a crowd, trying to get to him: “Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”³

Jesus is talking about a basic reconstruction of family loyalty, based on religious community, rather than kinship.

¹ Survey taken by the Barna Research Group in 1999.

² “Till Divorce Do Us Part” in *American Heritage*, November 2000.

³ Mark 3.31–35

And Paul was no protector of the “sanctity” of marriage. “So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and *he who refrains from marriage will do better*. A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgment she is more blessed if she remains as she is.”⁴ Does that mean that when a couple comes to me or to Sharon that we discourage their union? By no means!

Our culture has changed. We feel strongly about “family values” not because they are biblical, but because they are part of *our* culture.



No church is out there advocating divorce. But if the key value Jesus sought to promote was compassion, isn't it the duty of churches to approach its members who are going through a divorce with a deep sense of compassion?

The UCC is the only denomination I know of that has an order of worship that recognizes the end of a marriage. Now, that sounds pretty odd to most of us, but if the church is involved in helping a couple through the process of premarital counseling and marriage, why wouldn't the church be there to help people going through what is often a traumatic experience?

Here is part of the introduction to this particular rite: “This service is penitential in nature and cannot be construed to be an encouragement of divorce or a deprecation of marriage. It does not celebrate the failure of a relationship, but acknowledges that a divorce has occurred and that two human beings are seeking in earnest to reorder their lives in a wholesome, redemptive way. The service is a reminder that nothing can separate people from the love of God in Jesus Christ.”⁵



I want to share a story with you about a woman who came into my office last week. Her husband is a fundamentalist Christian who studied “Bible” at a “Christian” college, and he was very insistent with her that she was in error because she was not acknowledging his headship of the family and not subordinating herself to him. And you can find that in the Bible, if you search hard enough...it's right near the part in Titus that tells slaves to “be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect, that they are not to talk back...”⁶

Now, this husband who is well-versed in the Bible left his wife and divorced her, and isn't paying spousal or child support. What part of the Bible wasn't he paying attention to?

Protection of those who were most vulnerable in his society – women and children – is what Jesus had in mind when he put a twist on the divorce law of his day. The idea wasn't to keep unhappy or abusive couples together; it was to get men to be responsible to their families. Another couple I know was divorced, and the husband helped the wife get through grad school and buy a home. Quite a difference.



According to the *New York Times*, “Kentucky, Mississippi, and Arkansas voted overwhelmingly for constitutional amendments to ban gay marriage. But they had three of the highest divorce rates in 2003.”⁷ Now, if the Bible Belt is so “pro-family,” then why are

⁴ 1 Cor. 7.38-40

⁵ *The United Church of Christ Book of Worship*, p. 289

⁶ Titus 2.9

⁷ *New York Times*, Nov. 14, 2004

their divorce rates so high? (*I'm not suggesting here that if Coloradans vote for an amendment to their constitution banning gay marriage that the divorce rate among opposite-sex couples in Colorado will go up!*) And if Focus on the Family was really focusing on the family, why wouldn't they spend more time looking at how to keep families together, rather than on how to keep gay couples apart?

Yesterday, I had the delight of attending the wedding of Jana Thomas and Julie Hedelson here at Plymouth. And for many years, the ministers of this congregation have performed same-sex weddings, and we've had a written policy on the books since 2003. It is significant that this church has taken a stand – regardless of what the state chooses to do – to recognize, affirm, and bless what is already happening in our society: the formation of families headed by two women or two men who have committed themselves to one another in the bonds of love, mutual respect, and faithfulness.

About ten years ago, Jean and I went to the wedding of some dear friends. After the service, the groom asked the minister, "Bruce, when do we do the official part?" And by the "official part," my friend meant signing the marriage license issued by the county. The minister replied, "My dear boy, we've done the official part, everything else is a mere formality." While I affirm that the religious covenant and ceremony is the central aspect of a marriage, signing that piece of paper provides a wide range of legal privileges that are not available to same-sex couples. Consider this question, if you will: *where is the voice of Christ's compassion in this story?*

You are going to have the opportunity to make your views heard in the upcoming election both on civil unions for same-sex couples and also on whether to enshrine Colorado's current law stating that marriage is between one man and one woman into our state's constitution. I would encourage you to think carefully and to bring your faith into the polling place.



It is intellectually indefensible for Christians to say they think same-sex couples should be barred from civil unions or marriage on religious grounds, as long as they are willing to accept divorce and remarriage of opposite-sex couples.

It is disingenuous for organizations such as Focus on the Family to say they are trying to preserve the family when in 2000 over 950,000 – nearly a million – American couples were divorced, and they take aim at same-sex relationship and blame them for the problem. I'm going to speculate wildly here, but I don't think the reason most of those married couples divorce had anything at all to do with gays, lesbians, bisexuals, or transgender folks!

My hope is that all people – especially all Christians – would vote on the basis of compassion and not condemnation. We do not condemn anyone for divorce, we open our arms with understanding and love.

To conclude, I offer you this familiar saying of Jesus: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."⁸

As we – each of us – try to remove the timber from our own eye, may we be compassionate with the others in our midst.

⁸ Mt. 7.1–5

May it be so. Amen.