

“Better and Worse”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Matthew 5:21-37

Let me begin by telling you that this is one of those lectionary weeks that I normally choose to focus on the Deuteronomy passage, because it is so rich. I tend to steer clear of the Matthew passage from today because, well, it's complicated. Here we see a bit of the judgy side of Jesus, a Jesus whom people don't often want to cozy up to. I also know so many in our congregation have relationships that are, well, complicated. Some have divorced. Some have never married, and I know a few of you are happy and whole as single people. And to be quite honest, I'm not sure how many of you have been or are in relationships that have been touched by infidelity.

I also remember being a kid and listening in church, with my head resting on my mom's shoulder. We would always sit in the church balcony. I used to think we sat there because it's where parents with squirmy kids could sit and listen to a sermon without being too worried their kids would steal the show. I remember the booming of the Schlickler organ, since its most impressive pipes were in the church balcony; when our Minister of Music really let loose on it, the sound would echo through my chest cavity and vibrate through my shoes and seat as much as it thundered in my ears. But as an adult, I recognize now the real reason my mom sat in the church balcony is because my dad, who had divorced her when I was two, sat on the main level of the sanctuary, with my stepmom and my grandparents. It was complicated, yet still their thirst for God was strong enough that they found ways to be in church together even when they weren't together, and for that I am grateful.

I also remember a sermon my pastor at that church preached on marriage; he spoke about how wrong divorce is, and how children of divorce are more likely to have serious problems than children from a stable family. At that point, I knew my mom hadn't chosen divorce for herself. And with my head resting on her shoulder, I wondered how much she felt the burden of how I might turn out. I remember wanting her to believe that what she could give me was enough, and wanting to turn out okay for her... but I did yet have the kind of words to tell her something like that.

So yeah, marriage is complicated. Which is why I wanted to push into what Jesus said about marriage in this gospel passage, and why I was bold enough to put “A Sermon on Marriage” on our church sign. During the week I had a few people from the community comment on the sign, saying, “Oh, so you’re preaching a sermon on marriage tomorrow? Good luck with that!”

Let me first offer this disclaimer: although I am married, I don’t pretend to be an expert on marriage. I’m learning as I go along, and sometimes I am better at it, and sometimes I am worse. But I do know that I—we—made a choice for marriage at a time when there was not much support for it in family or in society. Chris and I became engaged before it was even legal for a same sex couple to be married. Ours would be the first same sex wedding in the church I pastored at the time; the leadership suggested we call it a “commitment ceremony.” But we argued for the language of marriage, because even if it would not yet be legally recognized, that is the language of how we wanted our relationship to be defined before God and each other. When Chris told her parents we were engaged, it took a while for the meaning to sink in, and in fact on a trip to Italy, Chris’ mom made a wish in the Trevi fountain—a place that supposedly grants any wish made there—that Chris and I not get married. On her plane ride home from Italy, when they landed at JFK, a man in a rush to get his suitcase down pulled loose a piece of airplane equipment from the overhead baggage. It tumbled down, hitting Chris’ mom in the head and sending her straight to the hospital. When she recovered, she told her older daughter, Chris’ sister, “I have done a terrible thing. Here is how God is punishing me. I prayed at the Trevi fountain that Chris not get married to Leah. God is trying to show me how wrong I am.”

So needless to say, from the moment we decided to get married, to our decisions whether, when, and how to have a child, to decisions on how we fit our marriage into the pressures of two demanding careers, we have often had to be intentional in how we present—and sometimes even fight for—our marriage. Being able to take marriage for granted seems like a luxury we haven’t fully known. And, maybe from that angle, it’s a good thing. Because there is little expectation or formula for what a marriage like ours should look like, we have been able to negotiate and define our expectations for ourselves, mostly free of gender roles, in terms of how we share money, intimacy, faith, parenting, and—depending on who you ask, perhaps the least sexy of all—household chores.

These are some of the topics that make or break couples, and when I perform a wedding ceremony, I invite couples into my office to talk about how they will share these aspects of their lives together. We talk about how to cultivate trust in the face of

vulnerability, how to communicate, and how to nurture respect and admiration in one another, and how to have enough faith in one another to reconcile when they fail each other-- which they surely will. Last Tuesday I got a call from a man who was looking to marry his fiancée, and wondered if I could officiate—3 days later, so that they could have a romantic Valentine’s Day ceremony. The courthouse, he told me, was already booked for the day, so he thought he would try me. Now I know some people, my sister included, have had successful marriages that began as an elopement. But as a pastor, I consider part of my role in helping a couple start their marriage is providing space to talk about these different aspects of married life, so that the couple has a template for communication when these issues arise in the future—and they will. So, no cupid’s arrow from me this week. I kindly suggested that they call a professional wedding officiant instead.

My cousin’s pastor in Georgia challenged all the married couples in their congregation to have sex every day, for an entire month. You could tell from the glow on their faces with each Facebook post they made that month what they had been up to. If as a couple you want to do that, good for you! Have fun! And speak to Karen, our worship chair, so she can keep that baptismal font full. And if you do not want to take the 30 day challenge, fine—that’s your right too. While I affirm that sex is important in marriage, I would not oversimplify marriage to say that the recipe to marital bliss is to just get jiggy with it. And if you are single, and trying to figure out what level of intimacy is right for you, that’s an important journey as well—I don’t want you to feel ignored; married, single, divorced, widowed—no matter who you are, you are worthy of giving and receiving love, because God loved you first. Sexuality is a gift from God, meant to be honored and enjoyed, treasured and reawakened, always to be shared with mutual respect.

Although we don’t know anything about Jesus’ sex life, we do know he recognized how powerful sexuality is. He’s the one who stopped a crowd from stoning a woman who had been caught in adultery, saying, “You who are without sin may cast the first stone.” In that instant, as hands released and rocks tumbled to the ground, Jesus showed compassion. Yet in our lectionary gospel reading today, Jesus says, ²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Why would Jesus say this? Surely he knew that every listener among them, maybe even Jesus himself, had looked at someone with lust. For most of us, it’s in our hormonal wiring—we cannot help but to notice beauty, attraction, and even desire. They say that February and March is the high mating season for skunks. In Leonia, you can catch a whiff of their... perfumes, if you walk outside at night. Last week one skunk, a lovesick

Romeo, lost its life chasing tail while crossing Fort Lee Road. Its essence remained all the next day and night, a reminder of how our bodies are similarly fashioned: we are driven to crave one another, even if our advanced capacity for language and reasoning may help us to talk ourselves out of it. And mostly, we are able to talk ourselves out of catastrophic liaisons even if we may dream of them.

But according to Jesus, it looks like even those dreams may be forbidden fruit. He takes intention and commitment to a whole new level. In a series of formulas, “You have heard it said...” followed by, “But I say to you...” Jesus asks us to move from the bare minimum of what tradition requires, what the law requires, or what decency requires, to what might be more generous, more life-giving and more like God. For example, Jesus said, “You have heard it that it was said of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.” Everyone listening would have known that the Ten Commandments require that we not kill one another. But Jesus’ point is that if not murdering is the guiding baseline for relationship, then there is no hope for a community. It has got to be something more. And so, Jesus pushes us to examine our anger and find ways towards being reconciled with one another.

Likewise, regarding marriage, there are things the law says. Divorce was allowed in Jesus’ time, but the Jewish laws on divorce favored the rights and autonomy of the man. He could divorce her for whatever reason he wants—in Deuteronomy 24, it just says he may find “something objectionable about her,” he has to write a certificate of divorce, and then he can be done with the marriage. Women were not given the right to initiate a divorce, but if a man divorced a woman, she was left in economic, social, and physical vulnerability. In this way, Jesus’ teaching about divorce was just as compassionate as him stepping in to keep an adulterous woman from being stoned. When Jesus speaks about adultery, another behavior which, like murder, is forbidden by the Ten Commandments, Jesus not only condemns adultery but also the participation of the eyes that gaze with longing, the hands that reach to touch another outside the bounds of covenanted love: “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away!” Who among us, especially in this modern, hyper-visual age, would not be blind if we actually did what Jesus asked of us here?

But in moving us beyond the bare minimum of what the law asks of our marriages, Jesus tells us that “refraining from sleeping with each other’s spouses is just the barest foundation of Christ-centered community. What about honoring human dignity by refusing in any way to cheapen or objectify other people for our own pleasure? What

about helping each other to succeed in our marriages and other relational commitments, instead of making those vows even harder to fulfill?" (Debie Thomas, Journey with Jesus)

I took a literary criticism class in college with a notoriously difficult professor. When he gave our writing assignments, someone in the class asked, "How many pages do our papers need to be?" This student wanted to know the minimum expectation she had to accomplish to get a good grade. His answer surprised us all, who were experts at adding filler and changing fonts to get the right sized paper. "It doesn't matter how long your paper is," he told the class, "as long as it is made from finely spun gold." In a similar way, Jesus redirects us from the letter of the law in regards to our relationships, and re-forms our understanding into the spirit of the law. Instead of doing the bare-minimum, word count of our assigned interactions, Jesus calls us into something deeper. "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity...Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live," God told the Hebrews in Deuteronomy. This was not a speech given for one person or even for one marriage. It was given to a community, surely made of married and single and widowed and divorced folks, calling them to muster forth enough faithfulness together to make this enterprise with the holy one actually work.

Our loving relationships may not always look like finely spun gold. But if we invite into them God's calling towards the fullness of life, perhaps we can offer something more than the minimum requirement. And at times, we may strike the chords in our love relationships that will also call forth God's love for us, in ways that echo through the chest cavity and vibrate through our shoes and seat as much as it thunders in our ears. For better or for worse, whether we find love through our friendships and community, or family, or spouses, God created us for love, because God first loved us so dearly. We are the instruments of that love to one another. And we are worthy enough to give and receive love.

