Sunday, October 5, 2003
MARRIAGE, DIVORCE AND THE BIBLE
Mark 10:2-16

What does the Bible have to say about marriage and divorce? I am beginning this sermon with that question because a comment frequently heard today is: “The institution of marriage is in a crisis. To solve this problem, we need to return to the biblical view of marriage.”

First of all, I do not believe the institution of marriage is in any more of a crisis than it has ever been. In fact, I believe that especially in this country, we have been making a lot of progress in improving our understanding of marriage and divorce. I am also convinced that the Christian faith has played a significant role in bringing us to a deeper understanding and appreciation of marriage and what I like to call “married love.” We’ll return to that later.

What is different in many parts of today’s world is that people are living much longer, and therefore modern marriage gives two people the opportunity to have longer marriages. This can be good news or bad news because people change enormously over those years. One man said, “I have been married seven times to the same woman.” Because marriages can last so much longer, new kinds of attitudes are necessary. One couple, married for over 50 years, said this when asked to reflect on their many years of married life. The wife said, “I regret the time we wasted trying to improve each other.” The husband said, “The secret of my marital success is I wake up every morning, look in the mirror, and say to myself, ‘You’re no prize either.’”

Second, there is no one single “biblical” view of marriage or divorce. If you look carefully at biblical views on marriage and divorce, you will find variety, confusion, and even contradiction. Furthermore, what you will find most startling is the extent to which many of the biblical views on marriage and divorce are not identical to our present views on marriage and divorce in the United States, and even contemporary Jewish and Christian views. You can be thankful for that.

Here are a few examples to illustrate the difference between our modern views and some of the biblical views. In the Old Testament of the Bible, it was a well-known and accepted practice for male Israelites to have multiple wives and concubines. This was commonly accepted. It was not prohibited by the Hebrew Bible, at least for men who could support a large household. They were convinced that this had God’s approval.

Although in some parts of the Bible, marriage is sometimes conceptualized as a covenant between two marriage partners, in many other cases it is understood to be a sort of agreement between a husband and his father-in-law. The women are not consulted. They are considered property. This is why in one version of the Ten Commandments found in the book of Exodus, wives are listed alongside slaves, oxen, donkeys, and other property as items belonging to one man that another man should not covet.

Another example of a biblical view on marriage that goes against the official positions of Judaism and Christianity, as you know them today, is the fact that marriage in the Hebrew Bible does not seem to have required sexual exclusivity from both partners, but only from the wife. If you read the laws and narratives pertaining to “adultery” and “virginity” carefully, what you discover is that technically husbands do not seem to be forbidden from having sexual relations with women outside the marriage bond. They were forbidden from having sexual

relations with particular women, specifically women who fell under some other man's authority, such as a wife or unmarried daughter. It was a matter of respecting another man's property rights. But in many other areas, they could be promiscuous. For example, it was okay for a married man to visit a prostitute. Prostitution was considered natural and necessary as a safeguard of the virginity of brides and the property rights of husbands.

I could give many more examples of various biblical views of marriage that we would not approve of today — and for good reason.

The point is that views on marriage and divorce, even in the Bible, have never been static. They have changed and evolved over the years. This is true in all cultures and religions, in civil marriage laws and religious traditions. This past week, mainland China finally did away with the rule that you had to have your employer's permission to get married.

A study of the history of the civil understanding of marriage and the laws surrounding it in the United States and in many other countries is very revealing. They have all evolved and, in many cases, changed dramatically — and most of the time, the changes have been for the better.

For example, how did marriage, which was considered a religious duty in medieval Europe, become a venue for personal fulfillment in much of the contemporary world? How did the notion of romantic love, a novelty in the Middle Ages, become a prerequisite for many marriages today? How did the practice of polygamy (the practice of having many wives at one time), still present in many cultures and some religions today, evolve into monogamy in many other cultures? How did the practice of parents choosing a spouse for their child evolve into individuals making their own choice of a mate? And if the original purpose of marriage was procreation, what exactly is the purpose for many married people today who cannot or do not want to have children?

In the Middle Ages, a husband had the legal right to his wife's clothes, jewelry, even her bed linens. He also had the legal right to beat her.

For many years in this country, married women could not hold property in their name, but only in their husband's name.

You might also be surprised to hear that in the four gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — Jesus had very little to say about marriage and divorce. The passage read today from Mark's gospel is one example. The same story is found in Matthew's gospel. In this story, Jesus is asked a question about divorce. That's what prompts his brief statement about marriage and divorce. It's also revealing to note that the people asking the question were not seeking advice, but they wanted to test him. He did not initiate the discussion. This is followed by a story where he welcomes the little children that his disciples were trying to keep away from him.

The only other place in the Bible where Jesus comments on marriage, divorce, and adultery is a very brief statement in the Sermon on the Mount. There's also that story in the gospel of John where he attends a wedding reception, and when the wine is gone, he provides additional wine at his mother's request. Later in that gospel, he forgives a woman about to be stoned to death for adultery.

The Apostle Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament, also had very little to say about marriage. In what little he has to say, he seems to imply that marriage is a potential hindrance to living a Christian life. His view of marriage is that, at best, it is a sort of compromise for those Christians who are unable to live up to the preferred calling of unmarried commitment to the Christian way.

Those who came to test Jesus knew that the law of Moses in the Old Testament allowed for divorce. In fact, divorce for the husband was very easy. Jesus was making the point here that it was too easy. He strongly disagreed with the tradition in which he grew up. He said that people, especially men, were not taking the marriage commitment seriously enough.

Later, in private, the disciples asked him for more clarification on the subject of marriage and divorce, and he said, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” In other words, if you are married and then see someone that looks better to you and so you get a divorce in order to marry that person, you are committing adultery. For those of you who know the Ten Commandments, to commit adultery is to break one of them.

For those of you who want to pride yourselves on not having committed adultery, listen to this: in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also had this to say about adultery: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also gave a new meaning and a broader interpretation to a number of the other Ten Commandments. It is obvious that most of us break most of these regularly as well. For example, the tenth commandment is: “Do not covet.” Can any one of you say you have not broken that one and maybe break it regularly? Our capitalist market economy would go into a deep depression if everyone stopped coveting. Or how about the first commandment, “You shall not worship any other gods.” That, of course, includes the god of money, the god of success, the god of fame, the god of work, or whatever in life you make your ultimate concern — that is your god. Do you ever break that commandment?

Or how about the commandment to keep one day holy? Or the commandment to honor your father and your mother? Or the commandment about not bearing false witness, which includes gossip about another person. Isn’t it amazing how you tend to single out one or another of the Ten Commandments and then harshly judge other people but forget how many of them you break?

What Jesus taught is that rules, such as the Ten Commandments, are ideals or goals that you are to do your best to follow, knowing at the same time that you will never live up to them perfectly.

Remember this above all — one day when someone asked Jesus which of the commandments was the greatest or the most important, he did not single out one of the ten. He said, “The greatest, the most important commandment of all is: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

This “love” ethic is the most important principle of all. Here’s how it is to be applied to a Christian marriage. A Christian marriage is not a contract. It is a covenant. Contracts are conditional. You are obliged to keep a contract only if your partners are doing the same. A Christian covenant is unconditional. You are obliged even if the partners break the terms.

Contracts are temporary. You are bound by them only so long as it suits you, provided you pay the consequences of breaking them. Covenants are durable. You are bound by the marriage covenant “as long as you both shall live.” Covenants are governed by the demands of love. Sometimes, however, even covenants will fail and be broken. That is where God’s forgiveness enters the picture. Because your marriage failed and you have been divorced does not mean you are excluded. It does not mean you can never marry again. In this church, we welcome the divorced, the single people, and the remarried. We also welcome those who have borne false witness, those who have coveted, those who have worshiped other gods, and whatever other commandment you have broken. God forgives you and welcomes you.

That’s what makes the second part of this story from Mark’s gospel so important. It is an affirmation that God continually welcomes all people. The disciples had been trying to keep little children away from him, but he would not allow it. He said, “Let the children come to me. Do not stop them!” All are welcome in God’s community. The words over the main front door of this church state it boldly: “Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Amen.