

Matthew 5:27-32

February 3, 2019
Wildwood Mennonite Church

Breaking Vows: Grace in Community

Good morning! My name is Anita and I am an adulterer (according to our text from the Sermon on the Mount.) I hope to share with you this morning some of my experience of divorce and how I navigate the scriptures that would label me an adulterer. But before I jump into this, I would like to say that I am really happy to be here this morning. This is the first time that I have preached in a Sunday service since I retired two and a half years ago. I have to thank your worship committee and Joe for the fabulous topic that they assigned to me in this series on Jesus' teachings. Well, who better to talk about divorce than someone who has lived it! Divorce has changed me, it has shaped me and it has forced me to think about truth, forgiveness, judgment and grace in a way that I probably wouldn't have otherwise. Divorce is a humbling and frightening experience, it can be a family disaster and it is definitely a challenge for the community.

I am very grateful that the punishment for divorce, categorized as adultery in Old Testament times, is no longer practiced. It was not the mere shunning and ostracization that our church communities used to be so adept at. No, that has been bad enough. The biblical consequence of adultery was death. Needless to say, this does rather grab my attention. Moreover, being a part of the Sermon on the Mount, which Mennonites have so famously identified with, these details become all the more important for my life of faith. What to do with it all?

Let's start with the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount. You have had several Sunday mornings devoted to this scripture story already. It is Jesus' public speaking debut. His story has been told at a pretty fast clip. Jesus' birth is documented in Matthew chapter 1 as a political threat to King Herod followed by the story of John the Baptist who provides baptism that is open to all, anyone, regardless of social or religious status. Immediately following we read of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness where he rejects the kind of power held by kings like Herod. Then swiftly on with the story, Jesus chooses his disciples from a ragtag group of fishermen and sets **them** up to go out and preach and heal without

endorsement from the religious powers-that-be. So, this guy Jesus is turning everything upside down. In his camp there is no deference to “the way we have always done things around here.”

And this is good news, especially for someone like me, an adulterer. I will get back to this later. The Sermon on the Mount begins with a series of blessings on those who are usually overlooked; the poor, the meek, the spiritually exhausted, the peacemakers etc. From the underside of society Jesus calls forth the goodness of those who struggle and bear burdens. This is not only good news but new news! It is a new thing, a new interpretation! Now, the old thing, never to be set aside, the Ten Commandments and the Law that surround it, is not bad; it is misused, maybe even ignored. The Ten Commandments remain the foundation of Jesus’ sermon here as does all of his central teaching. Consider the Golden Rule. It is also part of the Sermon. “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Matt. 7:12) See the connection? It is based solidly on the Ten Commandments. And look also at another very important teaching found later on in Matthew’s story. Chapter 22 tells of a Pharisee asking Jesus, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus responds with new news, a new interpretation of the commandments, saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt. 22:36-40) So, we are not throwing out the Ten Commandments but we are listening for a new interpretation an expansion of its meaning for a new time and this is precisely what Jesus does.

“You’ve heard the commandment”, Jesus says, “No committing adultery.’ But **I** tell you...” Get ready! Jesus is about to mess with the rules: He continues, “those who look lustfully at others have already committed adultery with them in their hearts.” Here is the new news, the good news actually: a new interpretation. I am thinking here that Jesus says the rules about divorce and adultery warn everyone that **motives** matter. There is no talk of the punishment of death but there is great scrutiny on intention and the results of

breaking covenant. That is what adultery is: breaking covenant. “So be warned,” Jesus is saying, “before you are tempted to do something harmful remove, get rid of, anything that allows you to act on behaviour that you know will hurt others.” Plucking out an eye or cutting off a body part is pretty graphic but you get the point. Stop yourself. Don’t do it. Remember that when you divorce your partner you are breaking the covenant that you made together under God and for all time. Your actions cause the other to live a lie. The covenant between two people has been destroyed and now a separation exists in its place: a gulf created that changes everything. The ripple effects are huge.

Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, offers an evocative translation of this passage. Here are a couple of snippets: “Your heart can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your body. Those leering looks you think nobody notices—they also corrupt.” And this: “Remember the Scripture that says, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him do it legally, giving her divorce papers and her legal rights? Too many of you are using that as a cover for selfishness and whim, pretending to be righteous just because you are ‘legal.’ Please no more pretending. If you divorce your wife, you’re responsible for making her an adulteress (unless she has already made herself that by sexual promiscuity). And if you marry such a divorced adulteress, you’re automatically an adulterer yourself. You can’t use legal cover to mask a moral failure.” We will get back to the moral failure part along with the language of adultery and the ripple effects that come as part of breaking covenant.

But before we get to that I have one more thing to say about scripture and interpretation in light of this topic. When Jesus says in public and in front of hundreds of people, “You’ve heard the commandment, “No committing adultery.” But I say to you...”, when Jesus says this he is smashing to pieces the carefully monitored system of religious control. And that is a big deal! He has the audacity to suggest that he has a new interpretation of the Ten Commandments, the law. He says without reservation, “Listen to me. You have missed the point of these rules and you are hiding behind them. You have disregarded the spirit of the law and you sin by pretending that you are so pious and holy. Instead of upholding The Commandments you violate them with your careless and cold hearts.” (now that is my interpretation!)

Jesus reinterprets scripture for his time. So, for those who say that they read the bible literally I don't know what they do with two interpretations if only one can be correct. Your bulletin has also reinterpreted scripture. Today's text is taken from the Inclusive Bible which is a significant redo of the King James Version which many of us old folks first knew. It is also very different from the New Revised Standard Version from which I have studied and preached over these last 30 years. The verses that you find in your bulletin have taken away the gender specific language of a man divorcing a woman: the historic reality of Jesus' time. Women did not divorce men. The story has been changed so that it makes more sense in 2019 and is more egalitarian. You may have noticed that the passage from The Message that I quoted just a bit ago used the original historic context where we hear of men issuing divorce decrees to women when they wish to set them aside. That is no longer our reality, at least here in North America. And so, on this Sunday we are using a translation that has made some very major changes to get at the heart of the matter. All this is to say that when we are face to face with a difficult text like this one and as the world around us changes, we must consider the spirit of the text and interpret it for our time. Jesus did it all the time. OK, now on to adultery and throwing body parts into Gehenna and moral failure.

Adultery has mainly to do with breaking vows, breaking promises, breaking covenant. Choosing another sexual partner over against the one to whom you have covenanted is a gross violation of God's intent for humanity according to the law of ancient Israel. It is punishable by death. That is how important covenanting is in the Old Testament story. Breaking covenant destabilizes families, leaves women defenseless, sometimes homeless and often forces these women who have been set aside into prostitution in order to survive. That is the Old Testament context.

I maintain that breaking covenant has a similarly devastating effect today though the context has changed considerably. My separation and divorce almost 15 years ago caused extreme stress and sadness for my children. It caused huge upheaval in our extended families and left our friends wondering how to relate to us as we separated

households forever. It had devastating consequences for us as a couple, who had years before made a covenant to share love and a home, raise a family and contribute together to community. All our hopes were set on being a happy couple and having a home that was warm and stable. It felt like a horrible failure both relationally and morally. When everything fell apart – and it took some years to reach that point – it hurt a lot of people. This is the core concern of Jesus' teaching about divorce.

We create our own hell on earth by breaking covenants...and we all do it! There are many ways to break covenant without actually divorcing, or murdering or lying out loud. There are subtle and covert ways of being unfaithful – to partners, to children, friends and other family members, to a church community. Boredom and carelessness in relationships, neglect, the cold shoulder, selfishness, stubbornness, the notion that everyone else has a better life than I, the desire for things just beyond our reach...all of these and many more temptations throw us off course when we justify behaviour that threatens the promises we have made, behaviour that has the potential to hurt others. This is what Jesus means when he says “if your right eye causes you to sin pluck it out and throw it away... cut off your right hand and throw it away. It is better to lose part of your body than to have it all cast into Gehenna.” Gehenna was a ravine south of Jerusalem, a smouldering garbage dump: an ugly, desolate, awful place. You don't want to end up in a garbage dump! End of metaphor! Unfortunately, Gehenna has often been translated as “hell.”

The text on divorce and adultery with words intimating hellfire have been used in such a judgmental way in past generations. We've got it wrong when we jump to the conclusion that anyone who divorces is damned to hell. Jesus' point is that we must be truthful and careful so that we avoid the temptations that lead to broken covenant. There are situations where divorce is the necessary and the healthy course of action but do not be fooled, covenant has been broken long before divorce becomes the only way out. Covenant is not made in isolation; it ties community together so that when promises are broken peoples' lives are ripped apart. No one wants to be responsible for that. And yet I repeat. We all do it in some form or other! So, in the last analysis we must find in this text the

truth of our condition and a way forward with grace and forgiveness. This God's intention for us all.

The grace of God gives us space to be truthful about our failures and our shortcomings. We make big mistakes in life, I have made big mistakes and not always offered the love and support that I could have. My selfishness has caused others pain and I deeply regret the ways in which I have been responsible for my children's pain, my former husband's pain and the drain on family and community. There are things I would dearly love to do over. With gratitude I have moved along, with the deep sense that there is forgiveness for me and for all of us. My church community at Nutana Park didn't judge us and allowed our family to readjust to new circumstances and bestowed on us their forgiveness, care and trust. Life is very sweet because good things can come out of difficult situations.

Life is messy and that is not news to anyone. However, as followers of Jesus we have stories and examples of how to live together well. The Sermon on the Mount and all of Jesus' teaching point toward a life of wholeness and peace. "We do not ultimately love our neighbour because Jesus told us to," writes a prominent Mennonite theologian, "We love our neighbour because God is like that." (John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, p. 52) The truth and the irony of this quote is pertinent to our discussion this morning. It was written by John Howard Yoder, a man who is alleged to have committed significant acts of abuse and betrayal over the course of several decades and against a significant number of women. Life is messy and complex. Breaking covenant has disastrous effects in our personal lives and in community yet in the midst of the muck and the joy the truth remains: God is love.

"Love God and your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all of the law and the prophets." We love our neighbour because God is like that. Or as Cynthia Bourgeault suggests, "' Love your neighbour as yourself'" – as a continuation of our very own being." (Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, "Jesus: Wisdom Teacher", Cynthia Bourgeault, Wednesday, January 16, 2019) So here is the bottom line: we love because God loves us first and because God is like that. We love each other as an extension of

our own selves. This makes of us communities of love, of grace, of forgiveness. It is within this community that we dare to tell each other the truth. Jesus knows that we break promises and covenants: that in spite of our best intentions we really do make a mess of things sometimes. However, our screw ups are never the last word. We live in the redeemed and redeeming community of grace surrounded by the love of Jesus that is always new news to us. That is always good news.

Prayer – God of the Covenant we are your people. In this world of rapidly changing realities we cling to your commandments of love. Let us be truthful about our intentions and aware of our missteps but always with the knowledge that your love is stronger than all of those things that bewilder and frighten us. May we extend your grace to our neighbour just as you have done so to us. AMEN