

**“What God has joined together”**  
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**Based on Mark 10:2-16**

What God has joined together, let no one separate. Even though Jesus is talking about marriage and divorce, that saying reminds me of a family I know who adopted their two children. The bond that developed between the parents and children in that first year, a bond between adults who had lots of love to give and children who had been living with not enough love, not enough care, for all their young lives—that bond is strong and powerful and it gives life to the whole family. Surely God joined that family together, and God forbid anyone should break that bond they share.

Jesus is talking about marriage, though, and Jesus doesn't seem to have liked divorce much. For the most part, Jesus doesn't talk about family issues—the issues of gay marriage, abortion, illegitimate children; never mentions any of them. But he does say this one thing against divorce. Basically, he says divorce is not good. It's harmful to both people. Well, I think we could all agree with that. Divorce hurts, after all. Yes, there are people like Elizabeth Taylor and Donald Trump who change partners whenever they're bored, but even for them, I would guess, divorce is still a painful process. Paul Simon, the song writer who has also been married and divorced several times, wrote “you take two bodies and you twirl them into one; their hearts and their bones; they won't come undone.” It's not just not a good idea, some kind of sin to try and separate what God has joined together. It's also just really hard to do—to pull two lives apart, to untangle all the stuff that has been woven together. I saw my parents go through it and went through it with them, even as a young adult (I had already left home), and it was so messy and hurtful that I decided that if I could possibly avoid it, I would never get a divorce.

But I know of marriages—we all do, probably—where a divorce would be a blessing, something life-giving, and far better for the children. Marriages where one partner lives in fear of the other; marriages where the children are abused; or marriages where one partner consistently breaks the promises that the marriage is built on. Jesus doesn't talk about those marriages, I'm sorry to say, so we don't know if he would make allowances for those divorces. But we know, surely, that he would not give his blessing to abusive relationships of any kind. The 90s tv show “Grace Under Fire,” was about a woman who'd left her abusive husband. The character once said to one of her kid's teachers, “We don't have a broken home. Our home was broken, but I fixed it.” And we all know that that can be true. Some marriages are so bad, divorce comes as the painful beginning of healing for all concerned. The bonds between a bully and the people he or she abuses are not the bonds of holy matrimony.

I might be trying to worm my way out of this saying of Jesus' against divorce, but I have to think of what divorce was like in the first century, the divorce against which Jesus would have been preaching. First of all, it wasn't that common. When it did happen, divorce was almost always something men did to get rid of their wives and not the other way around. The husband decides that he can get a better looking wife, or that his wife is never going to bear him a son to be his heir, and so he dumps her and finds another one. Jesus says to these men, look—just because what you're doing is legal, doesn't mean it's right. Your actions, although there is no law against them, are damaging the woman you married and yourself.

It's the divorce that gives up on a commitment that Jesus is talking about. Not the divorce that reaches out for a semblance of the life God intends for you. But the one where one or both people just give up, where it has gotten too hard not because of abuse or fear but just because relationships are hard. God doesn't want the human being Adam to be alone, and ever since Eve, God has created people to be together, but God doesn't make being together an easy thing. Jesus tells us, just because it's hard to get along with one another, that's not a good reason to throw people away. People in your life are not disposable. We're put in relationship with one another for a reason. We may not be able to fathom that reason, but there is a reason. And breaking the bond between any two people is not something to be done lightly.

People we bond with ought not to be thrown away just because they get difficult.

My friend whose son is pretty much deaf tells me that when she first took him to a playgroup for deaf kids, her son was the only one there who wasn't in a foster home. That is, the other kids' biological parents had found out their baby or toddler was deaf, and they gave the child up for adoption. They dumped the little kid, because he or she wasn't perfect, wasn't what they expected, was more than they were prepared to handle. But people are like that. People are more than other people can handle. They make demands, they make a mess, their lives fall apart and they need support of all kinds. But Jesus tells us in this teaching about divorce that people being people is not a good enough reason to break up our relationships.

It's a little like the war in Afghanistan. Our country is at a point now where we're taking stock of our relationship to the Afghan people. Are we doing them any good and how much harm are they doing us? Has protecting them, helping them, and trying to help them defeat our enemies become so difficult and bloody and complicated that we just need to get a divorce? Do we find new ways to fight this battle, new ways to look for peace and prosperity and good relations in this part of the world, or do we cut our losses and walk away? It's a tough one, especially for a country that still remembers Vietnam, a relationship that ended in a painful and damaging divorce.

And it's a little like our relationship with the people of God. We are gathered here this morning and sharing bread together, becoming again in this meal one people. And not just this group in this sanctuary here in Clifton Heights, but one people with Christians in New York and San Francisco, in Appalachia and Alaska and Afghanistan, in Zimbabwe and in Hong Kong. Taking the body that Jesus offers us this morning builds a bond between us all, and feeds the bonds affirmed in our baptism. We are, in effect, married, as a Christian family. God has formed this bond, and no human being should tear it asunder. Like a husband and wife, God has brought us into a relationship and expects us to work hard to keep the relationship life-giving and strong. That means we worry about one another, we tend to one another—here in this church and all around the world. It's a lot. Lot of Christians out there and many of them are hurting. We could walk away, we could pretend that our Christian family includes only a few low maintenance people, or a few easy efforts. But the married folks out there know that when you stop making an effort, the relationship fades; it stops giving good things to both parties. Relationships, Jesus tells us, are not disposable. Disposable relationships, like disposable dishes, would mean that you don't have to wash and dry them, you don't have to make room for them in your home or repair them when they break, you use them and then you throw them away. Our relationship to one another as Christians is not disposable. It does need maintenance, it does need to be cleaned and dried and repaired from time to time and it does need room in your life. When we stop putting in the work necessary, we're moving toward a divorce. From one another, from the body of Christ. That kind of divorce is painful, it's deeply disturbing, and it's exactly what Jesus is telling us not to do.

So especially in the stewardship season, especially in the fall when a new church year begins, we need to look around at our relationships to our fellow Christians, here and in the community, in our life together as a church and in our mission, local and worldwide. The shoeboxes we put together for Operation Christmas Child are each a small contribution to nourish our relationships with Christians around the world. With each box, we are saying, we care, we took the time and trouble to find out what you needed and what would make you smile, we are indeed your family. There are so many ways to nurture those bonds, so many ways to make sure our relationships in Christ do not end in divorce. Right now our church needs money, of course, but even more than money, the church is suffering from a need for people hours. A few minutes of your time to say thank you to people who are doing good service as teachers and deacons and elders here—that would be a start. An hour a week to come to the Thursday Bible study so we can help one another to a deeper understanding of God's word in our world—your presence there could mean that much more learning for the others who come. I know you have other ideas, ideas for how a little of your time could mean a great deal to your fellow Christians. I invite you to talk to each other, think about what kind of shoebox you're putting together for this church, for its present and its future. How will you show in the here and now, in a hands-on, shoebox kind of way that you care, that we are family for one another.

This church is not disposable. And if it's not disposable, then it needs a little loving care—not just the building, but the people in it, and maybe more importantly, the people who might wander into it someday. I want to know your ideas, your inspirations, your dreams for this marriage. How will it be made to shine and give love? What could each of us do to promote this relationship? As any married person will tell you,

and some of you have been married about seven times as long as I have, a little attention can go a long way to pulling you back from the brink of divorce. Amen.