

Second Chances: 1. Divorced

John 4:4-18

January 8, 2017

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In one of my trips to Los Angeles to visit our youngest daughter, she asked for my help in getting a small cabinet from a friend's apartment to hers. I think the primary help that she wanted was paying for the rental truck. As we returned from getting the cabinet, I drove down a side street in an area filled with one apartment complex after another. All of a sudden, she said, "Dad, stop the truck." There was a dining room table at the curb and she wanted it. I said, "But we don't know whose it is." And she said, "If it belonged to anyone, it wouldn't be on the street. That's what people do when they don't want it." What I learned was that most of what she had in her apartment had come from the street. So, I pulled the truck to the curb and together we put the table in the truck. It looked like it had experienced a hard life. I could see why someone put it on the street. But we took it back to her apartment and I tightened the screws until the legs were not wobbly anymore – and she cleaned and scrubbed the surface – and when we were finished it still looked worn but it was sturdy and ready for a new life. It had a new purpose.

Last week, I remembered that experience and thought about how we sometimes feel like a broken piece of furniture ready to be discarded – or we've already been discarded by the people around us, but God is ready to restore us. God can take what we are, even in the midst of our brokenness, and make us new again. God gives us a second chance.

This morning, we begin a new series on second chances – and how God is the God of second chances, and we all need that. Over the next four weeks, we will look at people that Jesus encountered who needed a second chance – and in the process, I hope we will hear that Jesus could give each of us a second chance. Today's story puts our focus on divorce. It's a topic I've never addressed in a sermon. Part of the challenge this morning is that you may be saying to yourself, "I'm not divorced" or "I'm not even married – what does this have to do with my life?" But every one of us has been touched by divorce in some way. If you have a family member, a friend, or you yourself have walked through divorce, would you raise your hand? All of us. We've all been touched by divorce in some way. Today, I'd like us to learn what the Bible teaches.

One statistic that we often hear is that half of all marriages end in divorce. However, that's not exactly true anymore. The most recent number is between 37 and 39% - and even that number is declining. Couples are waiting longer until they marry – and some are not getting married at all. If you've ever been married, you know why divorce happens. Marriage is hard. Our lives are hard. We experience change, and two people are not always seeing life the same way. Whenever I perform a marriage, I say to the couple – "There will come a day when you wake up, look at each other, and say – 'what were we thinking!'" Because if we expect one person to always make us happy, that's not how it works. It's not what we get from marriage but what two people give. It's a life-long commitment to love and serve no matter what. And though we say the vows: "for better or for worse" – saying the words is easy. I've performed well over a hundred weddings, and I can't remember a single one where the couple didn't intend to keep that promise. But it's hard. Let me offer four practices that will guard against divorce.

First, if you are here, you are doing it. A study by the University of Chicago found that frequency of worship attendance matters. The rate of adultery was cut in half for those who attend church weekly. Why? I think it's because when we come to church we remember who we are and what God's will for our lives is and we find strength and hope. And there is something about sitting

together for an hour, focused on what God wants for us. Second, set boundaries. A few years ago, I did a whole series called “Guardrails” – establishing boundaries that will keep us from wandering into dangerous territory. One of my boundaries or guardrails is that I never meet with a woman in secret. If it is not here at church, I always tell Amanda who I am meeting and why. I have never had an affair, and I never want to even entertain a maybe. So, set boundaries. Third. Willard Harley has written a book titled *His Needs, Her Needs* and he says we must pay attention to each other’s needs and how we can serve each other. My highest calling is to bless Amanda and in doing so that’s what love is. And fourth, remember the consequences. One of the questions I’ve asked someone who has shared their infidelity with me is “What were you thinking?” Their answer – they weren’t thinking. If they had thought about the consequences, they never would have done what they did. Four practices: Worship regularly; Set boundaries; Serve his/her needs; Remember the consequences.

The first divorce in the Bible is found in the story of Abraham in the book of Genesis. Abraham is married to Sarah who can’t have children, so Sarah tells Abraham to be intimate with her servant, Hagar, and in that way he can have a child. It’s an odd story, not one we should hold up as an example – but it’s how things worked thousands of years ago. They didn’t have weddings, instead the moment they were intimate Hagar became his wife. Hagar had a son named Ishmael, and then later Sarah had a son, Isaac. That’s when Sarah became jealous of Hagar and demanded that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. Genesis tells us Abraham was broken-hearted, but he did it. He sent them away – no division of property, no alimony, no child support, just some bread and water.

Fast forward to the time of Moses, and we read in Deuteronomy 24:1 **A man marries a woman, but she isn’t pleasing to him because he’s discovered something inappropriate about her. So he writes up divorce papers, hands them to her, and sends her out of his house.** A man could divorce his wife if something was “inappropriate” to him – another translation of the Hebrew word is “obnoxious” – which is interesting because there are a lot of times when Amanda just rolls her eyes – I’m being obnoxious! But fortunately, in Deuteronomy, a woman could not divorce a man – only the man could initiate the divorce. Fast forward 800 years to the time of Ezra who leads the people out of exile and back to Jerusalem. Ezra realizes that many of the Jewish men have married non-Jewish women and he tells the men to divorce their wives and send them back to their country of origin. It is God’s will that they should not have married foreign women. But then twenty years later, the prophet Malachi would write: “Don’t abandon the wife of your youth because God hates divorce.” So Ezra says God wants you to divorce your wife and Malachi says No. The Law of Moses says if she does anything obnoxious, divorce her – and Abraham sends Hagar away.

Then we come to the New Testament and in the book of Matthew, Pharisees come to Jesus and ask, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” They already know the law of Moses. They are testing Jesus. And Jesus says, **“What God has joined together, let no one separate.”** But then the Pharisees ask, why did Moses say a man could divorce his wife? And Jesus says, **Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard... I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.** That’s a hard message, prompting the disciples who were listening to say it’s better not to get married in the first place. They can’t believe Jesus is serious.

Remember Jesus often speaks in hyperbole. He makes an absolute statement to make a point without meaning for the statement to be taken literally. You might remember the time he said, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.” How many of us have taken that literally? He said, “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.” How many of us have done that – and yet we have all

sinned as a result of what we've seen. What Jesus meant was that sin is serious – not cut off hand or pluck out eyes. And I think Jesus is saying something similar about divorce. If you marry, the goal is to marry for life. In the first century, people didn't marry because they were in love. Marriages were arranged. Men could divorce for any reason, but women could not. And when divorce happened, the woman had to leave – no division of property, no alimony – and if there were children, they stayed with the man because they were considered the man's property. So the woman was left with nothing – and if her parents were not living, she was forced to do whatever possible to survive. I think Jesus is also says, look what divorce does to the women.

Jesus is teaching an absolute – marriage must be taken seriously. We must be committed to working as hard as possible for marriage to succeed. But the reality is that not every marriage succeeds and some shouldn't succeed. Adam Hamilton has said: "God never intended marriage to be a life sentence in a prison of unhappiness." If there's an affair, if a spouse is abusive, if a partner refuses to seek help, if you find yourself in a prison of unhappiness and you've tried and but the pain is relentless, that's not marriage. That's not what Jesus wants for any of us.

So how does Jesus respond to people who divorce? That's our story from John 4. When Jesus comes to this well in Samaria and meets a woman married and divorced, how does he treat her? With judgement and condemnation, or with grace? Jesus sends his disciples into town for food while he waits at the well. Jesus seems to know there is a woman who comes at the middle of the day which is not normal. Women would come early in the morning when it was cooler and it would be a social occasion to talk with each other. But this woman came at midday because when she arrived, the others would stop talking or they talked about her. She didn't belong. She wasn't included – wasn't acceptable. So that day when she arrived at the well, Jesus asks, Would you give me a drink? And she says, "I can't do that. You are a Jewish man. I can't even believe you are talking to me." And he says, "If you knew who was asking, I would give you living water and you would never be thirsty again." And she says, "Give me some of that water."

Jesus knew she had been searching, thirsting for someone to love her. Five times she thought she had found it in a husband and five times he had rejected her and now she was living with a man who would not even marry her. Somehow Jesus already knows her story. He doesn't ask about the circumstances or what her role might have been in each divorce. He doesn't say – if you will go through an annulment process or if you will stop living in sin. He offers her living water right where she is in life – no judgement, just grace and mercy. I want you to have a fresh start: drink the water.

One reason I invite you to hold hands at the end of the service is that I don't want anyone to be excluded. I want everyone to feel connected before we leave this space. And if you come here alone or disconnected or broken in some way, you belong here. And if you see anyone alone, I hope you will welcome them and say, "I'm so glad you're here today. This is a place for you." Sometimes, it can feel like everybody else has someone or everyone here must be married. I want us to be the kind of church where everyone belongs, where everyone finds grace and mercy, and everyone will find the God of the second chance.

God knows the pain and brokenness of our lives. God is ready to heal, if we will let him. For some, God is saying keep working. For some, God is saying seek help. For some God is saying, I understand your brokenness and I'm offering you a fresh start.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of January 8, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Lord God, we know that that we deserve judgement: judgement of the things we've done and the things we have not done, the things we've said and the things we have not said. But it turns out you are a God of second chances. Give us the grace to recognize your second chances and to have the humility to take them, through the love found in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Monday, January 9

Scripture: John 4:1-6

Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was making more disciples and baptizing more than John (although Jesus' disciples were baptizing, not Jesus himself). Therefore, he left Judea and went back to Galilee.

Jesus had to go through Samaria. He came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, which was near the land Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus was tired from his journey, so he sat down at the well. It was about noon.

Observation: John's gospel describes Jesus traveling back and forth between Jerusalem and Galilee more often than Matthew, Mark or Luke. The central story we'll read this week began as Jesus went from Jerusalem in southern Israel to Galilee (the north). Most Jews in his day bypassed the region of Samaria, between Judea and Galilee. Not Jesus. He went through Samaria by design (he "had to go"—verse 4), and reached Jacob's well at noon.

Application: John said Jesus "had to go" through Samaria. There was another route, but God's purpose compelled him to go through Samaria. Does God's love still call us to go to places that other people would avoid? What if those "places" are actually relationships/people? How can you break down barriers between you and other people in your day-to-day life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you did not avoid the hard places but trusted in God's guidance. Help me to see the opportunities to address the brokenness in my life and my relationships. Help me to trust that your steadfast love is always present to support me. Amen.

Tuesday, January 10

Scripture: John 4:7-10

A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me some water to drink." His disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food. The Samaritan woman asked, "Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other.) Jesus responded, "If you recognized God's gift and who is saying to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would be asking him and he would give you living water."

Observation: In the hot Middle East, most women enjoyed morning or evening social time as they drew water at the town well. This woman came alone at noon. She probably didn't want to face the other women in town. John also gave non-Palestinian readers key information about what made this conversation remarkable—"Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other" (verse 9). So Jesus made the first move, asking matter-of-factly, "Give me some water to drink" (verse 7).

Application: In addition to Jesus asking the woman for a drink, Jesus' disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food (verse 8). How can asking another person for some kind of help break down barriers that may separate you from them? Are you willing to ask for help when you need it?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, you were willing to ask for, and to accept, help even from unlikely people. Give me an openness to how your living water can help me quench the deepest thirsts of my heart. Amen.

Wednesday, January 11

Scripture: John 4:11-15

The woman said to him, "Sir, you don't have a bucket and the well is deep. Where would you get this living water? You aren't greater than our father Jacob, are you? He gave this well to us, and he drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks from the water that I will give will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in those who drink it a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty and will never need to come here to draw water!"

Observation: Jesus' offer of "living water" (the term commonly meant the freshest, cleanest running water, not stagnant water that had stood in a cistern) was intriguing. But the woman at first showed skepticism: "Where would you get this living water?" (verse 11). Her doubts didn't discourage Jesus. He described the spiritual water he offered in such appealing terms that the woman, thirsty for a fresh start, responded, "Give me this water!" (verse 15).

Application: Do you notice how naturally Jesus spoke with this woman? Jesus is clearly at ease with her, which frees her to confront her deepest needs. Who are the people who, because of beliefs or lifestyle, make you uneasy? How can the example of Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well help you find ways to relate more naturally and comfortably to them?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you told Nicodemus in John 3 that you had not come to condemn the world. You didn't condemn the woman at the well, and you don't condemn me. Thank you! Please teach me how to relate to others as you did. Amen.

Thursday, January 12

Scripture: John 4:16-24

Jesus said to her, "Go, get your husband, and come back here." The woman replied, "I don't have a husband." "You are right to say, 'I don't have a husband,'" Jesus answered. "You've had five husbands, and the man you are with now isn't your husband. You've spoken the truth." The woman said, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you and your people say that it is necessary to worship in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you and your people will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You and your people worship what you don't know; we worship what we know because salvation is from the Jews. But the time is coming—and is here!—when true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. The Father looks for those who worship him this way. God is spirit, and it is necessary to worship God in spirit and truth."

Observation: The woman probably came to the well alone because of shame. Jesus led her into talking about why she needed a second chance. She admitted he was right, but at first tried

to shift the subject by raising a religious debate between the Jews and Samaritans (verses 19-20). Jesus didn't take the bait. He said the key to worshipping God fully was not finding the right place, but laying aside shame to worship "in spirit and truth" (verse 24).

Application: Jesus said God is Spirit (a word that also meant "breath" or "atmosphere"). In other words, God is with us always and already knows all about us. God knows each of us fully (even better than we know ourselves) and loves us anyway! So coming to God in total honesty is not cause for shame, but for worship and praise of his love, mercy, and grace. What's on your heart today? What do you need to bring to the Lord in full honesty, knowing that God loves you as his child?

Prayer: Jesus, sometimes my shame keeps me from being completely honest with you. Help me to trust you and embrace the truth of your love and mercy so that I can more fully worship you. Amen.

Friday, January 13

Scripture: John 4:25-30

The woman said, "I know that the Messiah is coming, the one who is called the Christ. When he comes, he will teach everything to us." Jesus said to her, "I Am—the one who speaks with you." Just then, Jesus' disciples arrived and were shocked that he was talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?" The woman put down her water jar and went into the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who has told me everything I've done! Could this man be the Christ?" They left the city and were on their way to see Jesus.

Observation: The woman had said, "I see that you are a prophet" (verse 19). As Jesus disclosed her past without shaming her, the woman seemed to sense an even greater power at work, and spoke of the coming Messiah. Jesus replied, "I Am." The woman went into Sychar to talk about Jesus to the very people she'd been avoiding. Now unashamed, she said he was "a man who has told me everything I've done!" With wonder, she added, "Could this man be the Christ [Greek for "anointed one," or "Messiah"]?"

Application: Jesus' disciples were "shocked" to find him talking to a Samaritan woman. If they learned anything about her background, that probably added to their shock. They knew Jesus sided with rabbis who did not favor easy divorce (Matthew 19:3-8). But in her case, grace prevailed over "the rules," and she found a caring Savior willing to offer a second (or a seventh!) chance. When have you had to weigh strict rule-following against human pain and need? How can Jesus' example help you to find your way at such times?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you showed why a living, breathing Savior could better represent God's love than a static rule book. You're my Lord and Savior—keep showing me how to treat others the way you did. Amen.

Saturday, January 14

Scripture: John 4:31-42

In the meantime the disciples spoke to Jesus, saying, "Rabbi, eat." Jesus said to them, "I have food to eat that you don't know about." The disciples asked each other, "Has someone brought him food?" Jesus said to them, "I am fed by doing the will of the one who sent me and by completing his work. Don't you have a saying, 'Four more months and then it's time for harvest'?"

Look, I tell you: open your eyes and notice that the fields are already ripe for the harvest. Those who harvest are receiving their pay and gathering fruit for eternal life so that those who sow and those who harvest can celebrate together. This is a true saying, that one sows and another harvests. I have sent you to harvest what you didn't work hard for; others worked hard, and you will share in their hard work." Many Samaritans in that city believed in Jesus because of the woman's word when she testified, "He told me everything I've ever done." So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. Many more believed because of his word, and they said to the woman, "We no longer believe because of what you said, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this one is truly the savior of the world."

Observation: Jesus told his disciples that doing God's will, reaping a harvest of willing followers, nourished him more deeply than any physical food could. The Samaritan woman who'd found a second chance in Jesus became the first in John's Gospel to tell others about Jesus. The Samaritans invited Jesus to stay in Sychar. He did, for two days, and many of the Samaritans there became the immediate fulfillment of his words that "the fields are already ripe for the harvest." They, too, found in Jesus a second chance for a meaningful, grace-filled life.

Application: When were you last so excited about something that you didn't need to eat? Within minutes, the woman went from a social outcast trapped in a messed-up life to being the first evangelist to the Samaritan people. Outside the boundaries of the chosen people, away from Jerusalem itself, there was a spiritual hunger ready to hear what Jesus had to say. What excites you most about the ways in which you are able to serve God? What would you like to get involved in that would deepen that joy and excitement?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you said that people who hunger and thirst for righteousness are the ones to whom your kingdom belongs. Grow that appetite in me—and then feed and sustain me as I join in your mission in this world. Amen.