

Homily – The Spiritual Practice of Staying Put

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Like most Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Congregational, and Episcopal Churches, here at St. Barnabas we follow the Revised Common Lectionary. Several decades ago, all these denominations got together and created a three year cycle of Sunday morning Scripture readings. Every Sunday we hear an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, a New Testament readings, and a Gospel reading. The three year cycle includes readings from across most of the Bible. This includes almost all of the four Gospels, and for the last few weeks we have been working our way through the Gospel according to Mark. Today's Gospel reading is one that comes up every three years, usually towards the beginning of October, but usually we don't hear it. Usually on the first Sunday in October we switch up the readings and replace the normal readings with the readings for the Feast of St. Francis. The animal and pet blessings that we do with this Feast are a big hit, so we usually switch up the readings to match the pet blessings. This year we will continue to do the pet blessings, and most of our music is about animals and God's creation. However, I decided to keep the standard readings included this complicated Gospel passage. In it Jesus teaches us about marriage, and divorce, and adultery, and for good measure he then teaches us about receiving children. Two weeks ago, I preached about children and following Jesus down the ladder of life to embrace many childlike things that represent aspects of God. So, I didn't want to preach about children again. This left me pondering marriage and divorce.

I don't think I have ever preached about divorce. There are too many landmines in the topic. First, like many of you, I am divorced. Second, the most recent data about the divorce rate is from 2019 and it shows that the rate is down, but still between forty and fifty percent of marriages will end in divorce. This means that those of you hearing this sermon have an incredibly wide range of experiences with divorce. Third, some of you have never been married either because you didn't want to be married or you never found the right person. Or, maybe you are widowed. So divorce may not feel directly relevant to you. And, finally, as if there weren't already enough landmines on the topic, if you are like me then divorce is one of the most painful experiences you have ever been through. So for some of you, hearing the topic of divorce may trigger raw memories. However, even with all of these landmines, I am going to talk about divorce for a few minutes.

I think the first thing for us to understand is the Gospel context in which Jesus is speaking. Two thousand years ago, there was no safety net for divorced women. A man could divorce his wife for any reason or no reason at all, and this left many destitute. So, when Jesus is speaking against divorce he is speaking up for women

and trying to protect women from one of the ravages of life. I think this is still relevant to us today. We must make sure that both parties in a divorce are cared for and not left destitute. My experience of divorce shows that personal finances get very tight in a divorce. All of a sudden you have to pay for two households, two sets of just about everything. And there are legal fees. We sometimes think of divorce as a modern event, but as our Gospel reading shows us, the Law of Moses allowed for divorce. The laws of Rome allowed for divorce. Divorce is not new and the financial hardships that come with divorce are also not new. So, Jesus is being very practical when he speaks against divorce.

Here are a few more practical things about divorce. Abuse is a reason to leave a marriage. Abuse can come in many ways, and a person is perfectly justified in protecting him or herself from abuse. Or, protecting kids from abuse. Also, as a gay married priest, I sometimes get asked whether a gay or lesbian person should leave their marriage to someone of the opposite gender. Through the centuries there have been a lot of reasons that a gay man might marry a woman. I am a gay man who was married to a woman, the mother of my daughter. We are divorced, and I am now married to a man. However, when a man comes out to me as gay, and he is married to a woman, I have never been able to automatically say, "well then you need to get divorced." Instead, it is up to that couple to decide together, what is the best path forward. Maybe they will stay married. Maybe they won't. Just as there is great diversity in human beings, there are also many types of marriage. One size does not fit all.

Now, I have always been impressed with those churches that go the extra mile to help people remain married. I'm not talking about the churches that bluntly kick you out if you get divorced. Nor, am I talking about those churches that make divorce a mortal sin. Divorce is not bad because it is depraved or immoral. Instead, it is an impediment to healthy spirituality because it is so painful. It is a big gaping hole that is ripped into a life. It is the icky ending of a relationship. I define spirituality as relationship. Relationship with God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creations. Spirituality is relationship. And for many, your spouse or partner is the most important relationship that you will ever have with another person. Yes, for some, this most important relationship with another person is with a mentor, friend, parent, sibling or caregiver. But, for many your partner or spouse is the primary way that you practice healthy spirituality with another person. Marriage can be a lifelong school of love. Sometimes it takes at least a lifetime for us flawed human beings to learn how to love. God is relentless in leading us into healthy spirituality and therefore into healthy relationships with one another. And this is not always smooth sailing. A marriage will have many rebirths. Last Spring I preached a lot about order, disorder, and reorder, and this cycle is one that will repeat itself in a marriage. Marriage has ups and down. It is through thick and thin. It is through good times and

bad times. It has many times of disorder that only turn into rebirth and reorder if you stick with the marriage. Yes, sometimes divorce is the only way one can move out of disorder and into reorder. Sometimes divorce is the path to healing of the heart, but in my observation all marriages go through this cycle of order, disorder, and reorder. In marriage you will have life, death, and resurrection built in.

As an aside, there is one thing that I have noticed about a person who is about to go through a divorce. It is the belief that being single again will bring health in a few weeks. As I said earlier, divorce is a big gaping hole that is ripped into a life. And, it will take months and years for that wound to heal. Divorce can be a journey to healing, but it is a long journey, not short.

But again, I appreciate those churches and counselors that help a person stay with a marriage. I think we have all heard it said that money and children are the two biggest causes of stress in a marriage. Good communication and conflict resolution skills are key to a healthy marriage and quite frankly to a healthy life. After being together for more than fifteen years, Jeff and I still see a marriage counselor. It is only every eight weeks, and for us it feels more like life coaching. I appreciate churches and counselors that help us as we work to keep our relationships healthy. All of our relationships.

Jesus has a lot to teach us about relationships. Jesus is relentless in leading us toward healthy relationships with God, others, and self. He is tireless in showing us how the false self and ego get in the way of our life journey. We all have ego work to do to let go of our false self. Jesus says, we all need to let go of an excessive need for affection and approval. Jesus says, we all need to let go of an excessive need for control and manage our anger. And, Jesus says, we all need to let go of a disproportionate need for security and manage our fears. The need for approval, control or security get in the way of relationship with God, and these same things get in the way of a marriage. Spirituality and marriage can be very intertwined with one another. Can you see how your ego might be impacting your marriage. Or, maybe for you it is another special person in your life. Who is it for you? If there isn't anyone, then might God fulfill that need?

Now once again this week I want to provide you with a spiritual practice that can help you. This week's spiritual practice has the Latin name of *stabilitas loci*. In English this is stay in place or stay put. Staying put is exactly what it seems to mean. It means remain, don't go, persist, and be patient. We live in a society that prizes mobility. If we don't like something, then we can move on to the next thing. If we don't get what we want, then we can leave. It used to be that a person lived in a small portion of the world for their whole lives. It used to be that a career was one straight path. I don't want to go back to these things. There can be great benefit in moving

on. I think this is even sometimes true with marriage. But, as in many things a blessing is sometimes a curse. Sometimes moving on is not the best path. Perhaps the most radical thing you can do is stay where you are. The spiritual practice of staying put allows us to let go of the idea that we have an alternative. We give up the possibility of withdrawing. As wise ones know, one of the characteristic aspects of ego is that it always wants to have alternatives available. Ego and false self reflect a mentality that always wants to keep an exit open, and therefore we can never come to complete surrender and acceptance.

Through the spiritual practice of *stabilitas loci*, we learn to confront and surrender. As an important part of the mentality of this practice we say, "This is my place. This is my situation. What I already have is what I want to work with. I will stick with my current place and situation as it develops, for better or for worse."

The limitation that this practice imposes on one's ego proves to have another benefit, a flourishing of self-confidence and strength of mind that enables us to be in the situation we are in without any reservations. What may seem claustrophobic or restrictive actually turns into vast and hospitable space.

During Covid we've all had a bit of this staying put. We have found the deep inner liberations of giving up our freedom to come and go as we choose. When we can't fill up our life with outside experiences, then we must simply be with ourselves and with God.

As Episcopalians we believe that all parts of the Bible are useful. So, how was today's sermon dealing with a teaching of Jesus that is full of landmines? Once again I believe these teachings are because God wants the best for us. I am convinced that God wants us to grow into the beauty that has been created inside of each and every one of us. Ego gets in the way of healthy spirituality just like it gets in the way of healthy marriage. Whichever path you take, may you have God at the center.