

Matthew 19:1-12:

Introduction:

Friends! Today's passage is compelling and challenging. It brings up all sorts of questions, and I have just some possible answers to just some of those possible questions, but I think walking through this passage will be worth our while. So let's! First I'll pray.

Prayer:

Leaving Galilee:

Jesus leaves Galilee after last chapter's long conversation on Church-life. He heads south, down the high country toward Jerusalem, following the Jordan river south. He crosses over, the crowds follow, and he heals them.

And there, in this wilderness, some Pharisees come to test him. We remember the way the Devil did the same thing, and see these guys as devilish proxies. They ask:

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

***4 “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’
5 and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two***

will become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

The Pharisees are trying to trap him, test him: Reveal whether or not he's credentialed correctly, ought to be listened to. They aren't genuinely interested here. Do we get that? They aren't personally agonizing about a situation they're facing. They want to get him. So they ask him a question that, no matter how he answers, will cause problems for him.

But Jesus sidesteps every interpretation on the Law, by going back further. This is clever. To ask "Is it lawful" is to ask, "Does it match with our Jewish way of life?", "Does it fit with Torah, the rules for living that we're policing?" But Jesus ignores Torah, ignores the question of what's "lawful or not."

He wipes away culture and precedent and everything, and goes back to Creation. This is why the people are shocked at the way Jesus "teaches with authority." It's like he doesn't care about nothing! Crazy!

Precedent: "Male and Female"

Jesus says "at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female.'"

We have to stop here, because this is important. We read

“male and female” and see one thing being communicated: That God made men, and God made women. But more than this is being communicated. To say “male and female” was to also express the roles that men and women had as husband and wife.

Let me say that again. To talk about being made “male and female” wasn’t just to say God made men and God made women. It was to say that these men and women had roles with regard to each other as “husband and wife.” We read just “male and female” here, but Jesus, and other places where this term is used, are communicating “husband and wife”--not just the biological sex but also the roles that go along with that.

In Galatians, when Paul says “ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Notice what he does: He says “Jew or Gentile,” not “Jew and Gentile;” he says “Slave or Free;” Not “Slave and free;” but he says “male and female,” not “male or female.”

Now, Paul’s point is that the things we think fundamentally divide us don’t fundamentally divide us, because we’re all “one in Christ Jesus.” What we see as fundamentally dividing us is, fundamentally irrelevant to our status in the Lord. And these include ethnicity, economic status, and sex, but it also includes the relationship between the sexes, the gender

roles that come into play when we say “male and female” or “husband and wife.” There are enormous implications for humanity in this that we don’t really recognize. But that’s Paul, who’s talking to the Church this side of the crucifixion, resurrection, and the Spirit’s arrival.

Jesus is talking to Pharisees who want to get him. And he’s saying to them, basically, that God made “husband and wife.” Adam and Eve. They were both a male and a female, but they were made as a “husband and wife.” Humanity was made with a marital bond in play.

His second point builds on his first.

Precedent: “One Flesh”

All over the Old Testament there are explanatory things called etiologies. Etiological Stories. Things happen, and a little commentary gets tossed in that explains why something is the way it is, the origins of why a thing is called what it’s called or why people do what they do. Sometimes they make sense. “So and so ate lunch here, that’s why it’s called “picnic rock.” Sometimes they don’t, really, because after 5,000 years we’ve lost the sense of it. “He ate a fish, that’s why people there don’t wear shoes on Wednesday there.” “Okay.” It must have made sense once, but we’ve lost the logic.

We forget things and we’re blind to things. We forget that

the first chapter of Genesis and the second Chapter of Genesis describe creation differently. Each of them, though, deals with the creation of humanity, because, you know, it's meta. An account of creation for people, written by people, has to deal with creating people, right? And when he quotes this second passage, Jesus basically gives us only the point of a story that explains why people get married. He doesn't tell us the whole thing, because no one around him would have needed to hear it.

The whole scene is this:

Adam, the first Man, is looking for a helper. Can't find one. Helper here, people always remind us, and I will, points to the equal status this other person has, the unique way they are like Adam, not unlike him.

But for Adam[f] no suitable helper was found. 21 So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs[g] and then closed up the place with flesh. 22 Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib[h] he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

23 The man said,

"This is now bone of my bones

***and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."***

***24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother
and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.***

The point here isn't some bad theology about how women-at-large are subservient to men-at-large because Eve came from Adam; if anything, it should roll the other way, right? I mean, Eve was God's chance to do-over Adam, and got it right the second time. That's how I read it. (Pandering.)

God made an equal partner for Adam, and she was named Eve. The emphasis is on how similar the two people are, in contrast to the way that all the animals around Adam weren't similar to him (BGS, 86).

Context: Divorce's Appropriateness

But remember. Jesus is talking about husbands and wives more than he's talking about men and women here. He's talking about "male and female;" "husband and wife" more than "men and women." The whole context of today is the appropriateness of divorce. And when Jesus says,

'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let

no one separate.”

He's staying in this same context. In fact, most of the times the Old Testament talks about "one flesh" it's not talking about it the way we contemporary people tend to think about it. Let's be frank: A typical penis fits into a typical vagina. There's a connection that gets made, right? Two become one, linked. That's what generally gets lifted up when "one flesh" language gets bandied about by people. The idea that, literally, there's a fleshy connection that's made between the two. But, as one author said, we can't "overgenitalize" this passage (BGS, 87).

The go-to dictionary of the Old Testament includes this "one flesh" passage in Genesis under a category that defines the word "flesh" as "relatives" (BGS, 107). When Jacob's brother Laban finds him in the wilderness in Gen 29, he says, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!"; when the Israelite tribes try to make David their king in 2 Sam 5, they say, "Look, we're your bone and flesh!" As one author notes, "the focus is entirely on kinship, shared culture, experience, and identity" (BGS, 107). Ruth "clings" to her mother-in-law after her husband passes, which has nothing to do with sex, but uses the same word here that gets translated "united with" (BGS, 88).

Most often, this idea of two "becoming one flesh" isn't about having sex, it's about the fact that these two become a

family, become a new sort of kinship group. Their primary human relationship shifts.

Despite what Genesis and Jesus say, no man actually “left their father or mother,” in the ancient world. They kept working in the family business, on the family farm, together with their parents; but their primary loyalty, the center of their orbit, becomes not what was, but this new marriage relationship that they have. Is sex a part of that? Yeah, definitely. But the sexual part of the “one flesh” relationship comes after the new “family unit” part, the new “primary loyalty to this new relative” part (BGS, 32-33).

Jesus is talking about the way this “one flesh” relationship creates a new sort of unity, primarily loyalty, between a husband and a wife, that didn't exist before.

So what?

So what’s Jesus saying, Mr. Word Study?

In quoting these two passages Jesus is pointing out that marriage was set up for a radical allegiance, a radical commitment to recognize in the other person shared identity, culture, commitment to their good. Selflessness. A marriage relationship is meant to be “exclusive, life long, and loving” (BGS, 124). “This focus on bonding,” as an author puts it, “implicit in becoming one flesh is the basis for the Bible’s categorical rejections of all forms of sexual

promiscuity. People are not to say with their bodies what they cannot or will not say with the whole of their lives” (BGS, 109).

When Jesus says, “What God has joined together, let no one separate,” he’s setting the Pharisees up for their next, reasonable question, but he’s also calling humanity back to the truth that marriage comes with a fundamental shift in obligations and allegiances. We can’t make breaking it simple. God made up the marital bond, the reorientation of all our human commitments. Keeping that commitment, when it’s made, is baked into creation. We're hugely accountable for it if we make it.

The Pharisees get all this. They understand that what Jesus is trying to communicate is this fundamental loyalty that marriage creates. It’s why they asked their next question.

They Asked:

7 “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

8 Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality,

and marries another woman commits adultery.”

Look, we have our experiences, and the experiences of those we've loved and prayed for and who are, to us, our "flesh and bone," in biblical terms. Divorce is a thing, you know, among us and those we love. And what Divorce does, fundamentally, is that it "severs"--breaks--kinship ties and obligations (BGS, 91). The Pharisees were asking just how much freedom did a man have in divorcing his wife; Jesus says, "a little bit." If their spouse has already broken the fundamental bond, the kinship tie that sexual intercourse symbolizes, then that bond, that tie, is allowed to remain broken. The marriage has been symbolically ended, and it can be formally ended, too.

"I'm out!"

And the disciples react the way you kinda think a rational person ought to when he or she comes face-to-face with just how demanding marriage is.

10 The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

The Pharisees have apparently bailed; maybe they think Jesus is just off his rocker on this one. But he recognizes that the demands of marriage are shockingly high, and that they pale in comparison to the loyalty and allegiance and love he

is showing those who follow him.

Jesus wants to go back to the beginning, to call his disciples back to what commitment and allegiance and love truly are. He wants them to see what it means to live up to the bonds of marriage, because if we get even a glimpse of how significant this loyalty and commitment are meant to be, then we get a glimpse of how even more significant is his commitment to us. Paul goes on in Ephesians to talk about this at length.

Jesus hears the Twelve.

11 Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. 12 For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

Jesus is basically saying to his disciples, “Yeah. I agree. My teaching on marriage is shockingly demanding. If you can accept it, you should; if you can’t, don’t get married.”

The context here is one of responsibility. The disciples are shocked at the responsibility Jesus is calling them to. They like their outs, you know, whatever they are. They reason--or

don't reason, simply react, really--to the high commitments that follow the loyalty and allegiance of the permanent bond of marriage.

"I'm Out!": Eunuchs

He talks about eunuchs. A eunuch is, basically, a castrated male. Jesus presents eunuchs as a class, a group of people who don't have the responsibility that comes from a marital bond. It's good for him to point this out because we could mistake his emphasis on humanity being made as "male and female" as meaning, if you're unmarried, you're not really human. People do this. But for eunuchs, their responsibility heads in other directions than their marital bond, and Jesus specifically points out that there are those who "choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven."

He knows about that, right? Personally? All those commitments of loyalty, those demands that the bond of marriage make on a person, they are directed, if one chooses to "live like a eunuch" not toward a spouse, but toward the Kingdom of Heaven, toward the work of God. That's the story of Jesus' life, a guy whose kinship bond was, primarily, with God, and secondarily, with whoever God brought to him. "Whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother or sister or mother." These are the ones who we'd call Jesus' "flesh and bone." Jesus lays out the truth that some choose celibacy--"live like eunuchs"--in order to keep their basic loyalties and allegiance toward

God.

Paul more or less echoes Jesus, when he writes to the Church at Corinth about the way unmarried men and women can be concerned about “the Lord’s affairs,” while married men and married women are, simply, divided in their concerns, because they have a spouse to care about. If you weren’t walking with Smoky Row when we walked through Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, and you want to look at what we talked about when it comes to marriage, divorce, being unmarried, let me know and I’ll get you what you want.

Jesus implies that if people can accept the demands of marriage, then marry. If you can accept the demands of marriage, marry. But recognize those demands, the total restructuring of your basic human loyalties; demands that match the same selfless love that Jesus himself models in his great commitment to the Church.

But if you can’t accept the demands of marriage, there’s a very real option that you have, one that he’s taken on: It’s to let your loyalties, allegiances, and bonds be with God. In this way you can live, as Paul puts it, “undivided.” All the work that comes in nurturing the bond of marriage can be directed toward the Kingdom of Heaven.

So?

So, what do we make of all this?

What we see in today's passage is Jesus side-stepping a trap from the Pharisees. He asserts his authority to reject Moses, and conventional understandings of what it means to be a faithful Israelite. He reminds whoever will listen just how fundamental the marriage bond is to human life--and then says that if you can't live up to it, don't. If you can, do. He reminds the Twelve, who seem to be the only ones listening by the end of things, that to be unmarried allows someone enormous freedom.

Implications: Intimacy

We're suspicious of unmarried people, after a certain age. We kind of treat them like, oh, a meal that's not fully cooked. "You're single? Forty? Oh. Have you tried internet dating?" We assume that celibacy is a problem that's waiting for a solution, and if people don't end up coupled by the last season of our favorite TV shows, we're a little disappointed. We assume all this, largely, I think, because we have no room in our society for intimacy other than sexual intimacy, which is wrong, and in the Church, we have no room for sexual intimacy outside marriage, which I tend to think is right. What you're left with, though, is the assumption that if a person of a certain, arbitrary age is unmarried, they must be lacking in intimate relationships, in the experience of intimacy.

We married people sin against single people, unmarried adults, when we assume that they are incomplete because

they aren't married like we are. We sin against them when we set up unmarried people to believe that their experience of intimacy will only ever be partial. Because Jesus' experience of intimacy with the Father was something that we all long for. Paul's experience of intimacy with the Spirit was something that we all wish for ourselves. If sexual intimacy is the only intimacy we ever experience, then we've been sinned against, because love is bigger than penises entering vaginas.

So can we avoid the sin of assuming that being unmarried and celibate is "worse" than becoming married? It's rarer, certainly. It is outside the typical human experience. And yet, Paul says both states are a gift. There's a reason Jesus says about marriage, both: "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given." and "The one who can accept this should accept it." Marriage seems to be one of the few gifts that we get to choose; but to choose it is to choose to live a life of divided loyalties. Married people are simply not able to live as fully for the Kingdom of Heaven as unmarried people are. If we believe God loves us, won't it be true that God won't short-change the experience of intimacy for those who are seeking to live undividedly for him?

Implications: Work!

Because what Jesus makes clear today is that marriage is shockingly difficult. It obligates us in a way nothing else

does.

It is a fundamental reorientation of every loyalty and allegiance that we have. Our kinship bonds recenter on our spouse. We become “one flesh” with them; one person, “one, but not the same,” as Bono put it, and to be married is to ensure that we treat the life we live from that point on as a shared life. Whatever the roles we play in our marriage, we play them together, equal, “flesh and bone.” And that takes enormous work, so much work, of course, that Paul can say it distracts us from living for the Lord. And he’s just simply right.

So, if you’re married, what needs work in your marriage bond? We could get into the weeds here, we could talk about how this relates to the last chapter of Matthew, the way a sinner is empowered to deal with the sin against him or her, the way forgiveness is fundamental to our identity in Jesus. We could talk about so many different things: Intimacy, sex, cash, politics, everything. But how often, if we’re married, do we talk about our marriage itself, this marital bond that is supposed to be the primary human allegiance we have in the world.

So, if we are married: What relationships do we have with people that actively weaken our allegiance or loyalty to our spouse? How are we going to deal with that? How can we better nurture this relationship with our spouse that is meant

to be our primary relationship in the world? What must we do, today?

And, if we're married and we're thinking, "ugh." then it's time to do something. And whatever that something is, it almost certainly starts with us.

Implications: Break

And yet Jesus makes clear that the marital bond, which is meant to be our primary kinship bond, the central human relationship we have, filled with allegiance and loyalty, that it can be broken. Sex, which symbolizes--doesn't create, but symbolizes and nurtures--the "one flesh" unity and commitment that we're meant to have with our spouse, is significant. It's deeply significant. If we do find ourselves in sexless marriages, it can speak to an issue of intimacy and bonding that we ought to, if we can, address with our spouse. And even as I say that, I recognize how risky and terrifying that can be, no matter how anxious and difficult that situation is. But if we're married, and we have sex outside our marriage, Jesus says it severs the bond. If we take the symbol of our one-flesh unity, our central allegiance, to a person, and give it to someone else, we've done a thing that can break that bond. If I took Carolyn's wedding rings and gave them to a different woman to wear, it'd communicate something, right? And wedding rings a tiny weak nearly-empty symbol of what sexual union is.

The marital bond can be reforged; allegiance can be remade. Jesus doesn't say adultery ends a marriage, here, he only says it allows the other party to end it. In giving away the symbol of our unity and allegiance to another person, we don't get a say in if they take it up again.

Jesus talks about adultery, here, and I hope we see why. In some ways, and ironically, the Church actually doesn't see sex as the all-powerful symbol of our "one flesh" relationship with our spouse as deeply as we think we do. It's revealed in the way we have come to allow divorce, even argue for it, for other reasons: Abuse, Abandonment, other forms of what we call betrayal.

What we make of that is another conversation, and one we've had before as a congregation when we've walked through Corinthians, and it's one we've had with each other as we've walked together with people we love.

But we have to recognize what the Twelve got off the bat: Marriage is meant to be such a permanent restructuring of our loyalties and allegiances that we become "one flesh" with a person, and there's just no easy way out of that. At least, not one that the Pharisees, or the Twelve, seemed to expect to hear.

So, sex. It's the symbolic act that speaks to and nurtures our "one flesh" relationship with our spouse. It's deeply

powerful, but it speaks to the greater power of the commitment we make to our spouse to re-order our entire human ecosystem around them, first. Adultery is still the greatest betrayal, the greatest symbolic smashing of our loyalty to our spouse, and I doubt that will ever change. Let's avoid it, because it invites the end of our marriage, and we give away all power to reconstruct that marital bond if we decide to embrace it. More could be said about this, I know.

Conclusion:

Today's passage is interesting, you know? It's honest. It's honest about marriage in a way that we sometimes avoid. Marriage is work. It's meant to be permanent and demanding, and in marrying, we limit our capacity to live for the Kingdom of Heaven, even as we take part in something so fundamental to humans it's been around since both creation stories. The passage invites us to think about all sorts of assumptions we have about how we and others are living; I hope we remember that marriage, this total reorienting of all our human relationships to one person, giving them our allegiance, our energy, our selves...it's just a shadow to the commitment Christ has made to us. He'll never ever cheat on his Bride, you know?

Whatever anxieties, questions, fears, or the rest that today's passage brings up, let's remember that Jesus is for us, not against us, and will never leave us nor forsake us. It might give us just enough confidence to let the Spirit guide us to

do whatever God is asking of us after this morning.