

“Of Broken Pop-Tarts & Broken-Hearts: God’s Valentine to Us”
This Sermon was preached 2/16/14 at Trinity Lutheran Church
Focus Text: Matthew 5:21-32
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Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Healer Jesus Christ. Amen.

I’ve wondered now and then whether Jesus would be fun at a cocktail party. He did tend to attract some pretty interesting characters; he had an extensive travel log, albeit on foot; and there was that whole water into wine thing in his favor. But the Sermon-on-the-Mount-Jesus, the one we hear from today? I don’t know about him. Apparently I’m not the only one. There’s a pastor in DC named Meg, who in her blog admitted she “can’t ditch the image in [her] head of Jesus, standing in a small group at the party, leaning in to listen and shouting a bit to be heard over the music. Then the music suddenly cuts out and Jesus ends up hollering loud enough for everyone to hear *‘Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.’*”ⁱ

Awkward! And yet, you can’t go and claim that the God we know in Christ is a God who is far removed. This Sermon-on-the-mount Jesus is all up in our business: Not just concerned about our actions, but our thoughts; Not just outcomes, but intentions. And this Jesus, invites himself right into the middle of our relationships -- not just the Sunday morning starched clean ones, the messy-wrinkled-kicked-under-the-bed-broken ones.

So, thanks to Sermon-on-the-Mount Jesus, on this Valentine’s weekend, we’re going to take a look at Romantic Relationships through the lens of faith. From that vantage, we’ll consider: 1. Their intention (life-partnership/life-abundant), 2. Their undoing (divorce/separation), 3. Christ’s Gift (second chances).

What does God intend for our romantic relationships? I love this quote from Luther: “Ah, dear God, marriage is...a gift of God, the sweetest, dearest, and the purest life...when it turns out well, though the very devil if it does not.” Not all of us are married yet, married still, or ever will get married. But it doesn’t hurt any of us to think about marriage through the lens of faith because as it turns out, the culture at large can have some pretty unhelpful things to say about it.

You need only turn on TLC, click onto *theknot.com*, or step into *David’s Bridal* to know that *too much* nearly mythological ‘hoopla’ surrounds a couple’s wedding day. Then, it doesn’t take more than a few months of actually being married, to realize that perhaps *too much* is expected of marriage itself, too. We are conditioned to want perfection in everything: perfect mates, bodies.... children, moods, families. Fairytales teach that a spouse is the other half that makes you whole (as if we weren’t a full person before); that your spouse should be your bff, sharing *all* the same interests; that your spouse should make up for all your faults (like that’s possible); all while living up to a GQ or ‘Cosmo’ standard of beauty. Here’s a statistic for you: Exactly 100 percent of us grow up in imperfect families because those families begin with two imperfect people. In many ways, too much is expected of marriage.

On the other hand, marriage *is* a special institution. Because of promises of fidelity and public accountability, marriage provides a context of love, trust, honesty, and commitment within which a couple can express the profound joy of relationship and address the troubles they encounter throughout life. It is a binding relationship that can provide conditions for personal well-being, the flourishing of the partner, and the possibility of nurturing children. At its best it is intended to be a blessing to the community and the world.¹

Precisely because marriage often has unrealistic expectations built up around it and because it *is* this sacred place where deep human trust and needs do abide, marriage can also can be a place of great harm.

A few weeks back, I told the story in a sermon how my childhood best friend moved away because her parents were divorced when we were in 4th grade. What I didn't tell you about were the pages upon pages in my childhood diary that were dedicated to the pain that caused. Me. A child outside of that family. I wasn't the one whose parents had been fighting. I wasn't the one who had to move away with Mom while Dad and brother stayed in town. I was just on the very periphery, and the fallout from the breakup of that marriage was painful. What that couple, that family, actually went through some of us can only imagine, and others of you know too well.

“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. – Matt 5:31-32

I have a friend who is a retired pastor now, who tells the story of how he got into the pulpit with this text from Matthew one year. He looked out at his congregation, and they looked back at him.. See, when he got up to preach on this, it was two weeks after his divorce from his second wife had gone through. He read the words of Jesus that we just heard. He looked his congregation in the eye and declared, confessed from experience perhaps, that divorce is sin. By sin he meant falling short of God's hope for us. He went on to tell that if divorce is sin, it is *one* sin, that is, the breaking of a covenant between persons and between their God. The conflict, anger, grief, guilt, loneliness that can come before and after divorce, those are other sins and their shrapnel. Again, if sin is falling short of what God would want for us, none of that is what a God of love would intend.

Some might think, if divorce is sin, then logically considered, the opposite of divorce, namely to stay married, is *not* sin, right? We have all seen a few of the hellish marriages that kind of thinking produces. Either way, since when is the church the assembly of those who no longer sin? As Martin Luther said, “we are all beggars.” And those words of Jesus in the book of John, as he stood in front of a woman to be stoned ring true: *Let any who has sin cast the first stone.*

¹ Paraphrased from the ELCA Social Statement on Human Sexuality, 2009.

Divorce is not a failure of God or to be Christian enough to hold it together. Divorce is not failure. Sometimes the choice is between a rock and a hard place, and which would do least harm. Broken relationships--while they are not God's hope for us--just are.

It's funny how to accept that life is not always whole can be difficult for us. Maybe it's part of our wiring. That idea struck me as our 20 month old and I were about to have a blueberry pop-tart before bed last week. Since the pop-tart is about the size of her face, I broke it in half. No *big deal*? Wrong. I thought only my nephew had this hang up, but apparently this is a developmental stage. The next 15 minutes after I broke the pop-tart were spent in tears and agony trying to reason with a toddler why a broken pop-tart couldn't be put back together, and trying harder to mash it together just put it into smaller pieces. The brokenness just was. The first step needing to be taken was to see it for what it was (and in this case, eat it).

But then, **God's dream for us is not brokenness**, not to leave us, pressed down, in relationships that are crumbling. God's hope is that that we would have not just life, but life abundant. That's where Jesus comes in: to piece us back together.

Believe it or not, Jesus in his harsh sounding words on divorce today may have been going after this abundant-life vision for all people afterall. Divorce was allowed for in Jewish tradition and scriptures. It had to be official and was regulated by the community. The problem was that the decision to divorce was strictly the husband's prerogative, who did not have to go to court but could simply make the decision himself in the presence of certain witnesses. According to Deuteronomy 24:1, if the husband found 'something objectionable' about his wife, he could write a certificate of divorce. "Something objectionable" could be as large as cheating or gross impropriety, or as petty as something which displeased him, like burning dinner or talking too loudly in the house. Divorce was relatively easy to obtain and frequent in occurrence in Jesus' time. The fact of the matter was, it could leave a woman extremely vulnerable, far short of life-abundant.ⁱⁱ

And so Jesus says, "no divorce." This context I lifted up around this text isn't meant to weaken the Bible's words, nor lessen the seriousness that is divorce. It just yet again illustrates that there's a gap between God's intention/hope for our abundant lives, and our ability to live out that reality in our relationships.

The good news is, Christ came to be that healer, to fill that gap, to put us back together. We could think of it, as God's Valentine. **Christ's gift is that of second chances**. The cross and empty tomb teach us this. God's greatest act of love towards us is that God sees us in them but does not leave us to our broken relationships. As it says in 2 Corinthians 15, 'if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation.' There is the possibility for new creation both within your broken relationships right now, and after, when it happens that a relationship ends.

For anyone any of you who have experienced this, that's a dozen roses, a box of chocolate, a Valentine from God: For all the brokenness in our relationships, baptismal waters re-knit us together, the bread and the wine forgive and sustain us, and communities of care surround us with the compassion of a larger family to learn on.

Take a minute this morning:

1. Call to mind one of the relationships in your life that is important to you. *One that is healthy and whole and good and sustains you regularly. Think about what makes that a good relationship, why it's so important, and give God thanks for that person and the relationship they share.* Consider that prayer your Valentine to them.

2. Now, bring to mind another relationship that is important to you but that has suffered some damage. *There's no need to figure out who was to blame for the hurt, but rather take a minute to hold that person and relationship in prayer. Offer that broken relationship to God as an offering and as an arena of God's help and healing.* That prayer is also a Valentine.ⁱⁱⁱ

This Valentine's weekend, may the Spirit's power of love and healing be present among all your relationships, and the peace of Jesus—even Sermon-on-the-Mount-Jesus—be with you always. Amen.

ⁱ Pr. Meg Jenista, <http://www.dccrcsandbox.org/2014/01/26/jesus-at-a-cocktail-party/>

ⁱⁱ Keck, Leander. *New Interpreters Bible Volume 8: New Testament Articles, Matthew, Mark* (Abingdon Press, 1995).

ⁱⁱⁱ Paraphrased from David Lose, "The Relational God" <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=3071> (accessed 2/15/14).