

Sermon Text: Mark 10:2-16

I'll never forget, I do try to learn from my mistakes, and that's why you hear so many old stories from junior high and high school and college. I'll never forget some big, big boners of a mistake.

Back in shop class in junior high, now I was only 14, we had a project, and that was to draw some plans, and then to build something useful from those plans. Well, I made a bench for working on my motorcycle, my dirt bike, and I drew out the plans for the bench, and then I had it so that I could put tools on one side and tools on the other. I had planned for the seat to flip up, and have more storage under there. I had everything adjusted about the right height, I thought; to work on a motorcycle, mess with the carburetor, spark plugs, etc. When I finished, my instructor smiled at the awkward thing that I had built. It was not a good kind of smile. It looked kind of like a coffin. It was way too big, and the corners did not join right, and I had trouble attaching the hinges on the seat that was supposed to open so I just nailed those down. My instructor looked at it and he asked, “You actually built that thing from plans? Is this what you intended to build?” I said, “Yes.” It was so large it would barely fit in those giant 1970 vintage station wagons like my mother had. We could barely get it home. It hurt my feelings, but I had to agree, it did not look like what I had intended.

Now, this message tells us something about God's plan for what marriage should look like as we build it. When confronted with the question of divorce, Jesus answered, “Yes, divorce was allowed by Moses because of your hardness of heart, but from the beginning, in the beginning, it was not so.” God doesn't want that for us anymore than we would want that for our children. In other words, the intention from the beginning, the desire of God before our hearts were hardened, the blueprint from creation was a lifetime partnership, a covenant between a man and woman where we both submit to one another and serve one another under God, who is the head. Serving one another requires soft, changeable, growing hearts. Our hearts, all of our hearts, are hardened by sin, by selfishness, and by a refusal to make the compromises required for the two to become one. That led to the allowance of divorce. God would have spared us the heartbreak of divorce. It was not what God wanted. It was not a part of the plan. Some people ask, well, what is not part of the plan of God. You know, we do things contrary to God's plan every single day. It's called sin. That is contrary to God's plan. We do them all the time.

All have sinned it, says in Romans, and fallen short of the glory of God. Yes, we have sinned. Yes, we are broken, broken beyond our ability to even begin to repair. The only thing that can fix our broken souls is pure love, and we can go from person to person to person looking for pure love, and we will not find it. Only God can give us pure love. Only God makes promises and keeps them, gives words that hold forever, gives love that stays love for always. There is one who is true, one we can trust, one who is pure, and one who never forsakes, one who came and even died for me and for you. Such is the greatness of God's love.

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Now, Genesis paints a vision of God’s love triangulated in a good way between God loving Adam, God loving Eve, and Eve and Adam together and walking in the garden and talking with God, and where there is such love, and there is not room there for divorce, not room for war, not room for violence or lying or betrayal or hurt of any kind, and if we look deeply at the Ten Commandments, you will see what God willed and what God does will now for His creation – love of God and love of neighbor. Honoring father and mother. No murder. No adultery. No stealing. No lying. No coveting your neighbor’s spouse or anything of your neighbor’s. Your closest neighbor is your husband or your wife.

God had and has this as a vision for creation. This, I believe, is what Jesus is saying. We are so wrapped up in this culture and this time and all the desires we are told to feed and to fight for that harmony and peace and compromise of self for the good of our neighbor, all that is lost. The vision God has given us in the Ten Commandments is just not taken very seriously. It wasn’t not even in Jesus’ day, even in Moses’ day, because Jesus told His questioners, yes, Moses allowed divorce, but from the beginning it was not so. It is permissible, but it is not desirable. The plan, the ideal, still holds. The reality is you and I are not ideal.

Now, if I were in the kind of church that says Amen, somebody would have Amened that. The ideal still holds, but you and I are not ideal. We’re not. Our hearts are only semi-softened by God’s holy spirit. All of us have some distance to go before we reach spiritual maturity. The ideal still holds even if we cannot grasp it.

I used to tell my kids in school to aim for an A. If you aim only for a C, you will never attain excellence. Set your sights too low, and low is as high as you can go. In marriage, you are to aim for the ideal. A lifelong partnership, a team that sticks together through thick and thin, a lifelong covenant with God at the top of it, but that’s not what our culture is saying anymore.

I read about a kindergarten teacher, kindergarten teacher, who overheard two little girls talking, two little five-year-old girls, and one little five-year-old girl was saying to the other, “In my second marriage” That’s funny, but it’s not. In my second marriage! Aim too low, and guess what? Failure becomes standard.

Psychologist Judith Wallerstein wrote the book entitled The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce, and she followed 93 children of divorce over 25 years, a longitudinal study over 25 years! She says the divorced home is not as nurtured as an intact family, and the real impact of divorce occurs in young adulthood when they have relationships. These young people are terrified they will fail. Other recent longitudinal studies have come to the same conclusion, and as an adult child of divorce, I know this for myself. A child’s mind reasons like this. If my parents can stop loving each other, then maybe anyone can stop loving anyone, and maybe love isn’t real or can’t be trusted, and maybe no one can be trusted. It affects children of divorce in their marriages, in their relationships, and in their

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view of the world. Of course, it's allowable, and sometimes even for safety's sake, I know, there are times when it is necessary, but it is never the ideal, and it is never desirable. Even though there are times when it is warranted and justified, it should be the last resort. Divorce hurts children.

I had a professor in marriage and family at Duke, and he said that marriage is a growth or a death situation. He said that every marriage comes to a crossroad where they either have to give up or grow to the next level. You have to grow up to the next level or refuse to grow and become strangers to each other, wandering around the house like ghosts, or just divorce. That same professor said if we could get a divorce as easy as we get fast food or French fries from a drive thru, we would all be divorced. I think that's true. It takes time to cool off, to get counseling, to pray. It takes time and effort to stay married. I know.

In my lifetime, we have reframed divorce. In the sixties, it was unthinkable, and later on, it was okay, and now it is just no big deal. Marriage is a big deal, and so is divorce. We should not minimize either one. We even invented an odd way of speaking about marriage. We speak about marriage as a sort of thing outside of the husband and wife's control. We talk about the people are just fine, but the marriage is sick. I wonder about that. Isn't marriage what two people do together? Isn't it something that they build or they tear down or ignore? It doesn't do anything by itself. Playing word games like that makes it sound like the marriage is the problem, and the people are innocent bystanders, and that seems very strange to me. It always serves to let us off the hook of the work as individuals that we need to do toward the ideal of daily compromise and of covenant and of commitment.

Another little white lie out there is that half of all marriages end in divorce. I know some of you believe that, and you will go check my statement, and you will wonder if it's true. You've heard it, and you've believed it because it's been repeated so many times, and I'm worried that it has lowered expectations for our children and for young people getting married. That message is a blueprint for failure. After all, if it is true that half the marriages end in divorce, then how big a deal can it be? The problem is those numbers are not and have never been true. When people say half of all marriages end in divorce, they fail to take into account all the marriages from previous years that just keep on keeping on, year after year after year. They leave out of the equation all the steady marriages that remain intact from years before. Some of you have been married near 50 years or more. You balance out 50 divorces. Good for you!

Dan Hurley of the New York Times last year wrote an article, and he said that looking at only one year's data of marriages and divorces in one year without thinking of the other marriages is meaningless. He also wrote that the divorce rate in America has never been 50% and is declining.

This oft-told lie makes people think it is normal. No, it is tragic. It hurts people. It hurts children. It hurts the children's future relationships as well. Trying to normalize it does

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nothing but aim a whole culture lower, and to those of you who have suffered through a divorce, please, I know it is suffering, please hear me. I know that you have suffered, and I am sorry, and I believe that God is also compassionately sorry that you have been through that. I judge no one because I know that my old professor was right. There have been times when, if I could have gotten a divorce at a drive thru window, in a moment of crisis, in a fit of pique, I would have gotten one! If it had been one of those double drive thrus, it might have been a race, Caroline on one side and me on the other, to see who would get it first, and with some fries on the side.

My only desire today is to flesh out what I believe is the truth of the Gospel. God is loving, and wants us to learn to love and to compromise and to forgive and to grow over a lifetime. God wants families to teach those things to their children. That is the recipe for happiness and for spiritual and emotional growth. Marriage is an adventure. It is never what anyone thinks it is going to be. We do know God’s plan, and God’s ideal, I think, is laid out in the traditional vows that we use, “I take thee to be my wedded husband or wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until death do us part, according to God’s holy ordinance and there to I pledge thee my faith. It is an ideal meant for our good and for our growth, and it sometimes seems impossibly hard work to maintain a marriage over a lifetime. I know. We know this. Only with God’s help and aiming for the ideal from both spouses do you ever get even close. If there is violence, if there is substance abuse, if there is adultery, if there is emotional abuse, then the covenant is already broken, and I would stand by, as a pastor, anyone who has tried and could not stay safely at home.

Marriage is so heavy a load that it takes two to lift the pieces into place and God to make our hearts able to build it together. It is too heavy to lift alone.

You know, there is a not funny joke that says in marriage the two become one, and after the honeymoon, you find out which one. Think about it. That will not do.

Remember what Paul wrote about marriage in Ephesians. He said to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, and Jesus said to love your neighbor as yourself. Your spouse is your nearest neighbor. Jesus said where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in your midst. The midst! The middle! God inhabits the middle ground, and so I’m closing with this thought. When your marriage is less than ideal, move to that middle ground. That’s where God is. That’s where you both should be. I hope you’ve heard grace. Grace is what I intend. Amen.