

Betsey Moe
“Staying True”
5.2.10

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 2When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. 3For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. 4Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. 5Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; 6I will say to the north, “Give them up,” and to the south, “Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— 7everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

Matthew 5:27-37

27“‘You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. 31“‘It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33“‘Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ 34But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Years ago, Eric and I attended a youth ministry convention at a hotel conference center in San Diego. We sat down in the ballroom for the opening session with our cumbersome packets, chock full of maps and workshop schedules and conference instructions. Then, the leader of the event, Mike Yaconelli, who was a popular pastor and writer and public speaker at the time, stepped up to the microphone to give the welcome. “I want you,” he said, “to make this conference what you need it to be. Some of you are burnt out youth ministers, and your marriages are on the rocks. To you, I say, ‘Go get a bottle of wine, head to your hotel room, and don’t come out for three days.’” It was a great way to start a conference – and luckily, our hotel had excellent room service.

Later in the conference, I went to one of Mike Yaconelli’s workshops where he talked a little about his own life. It turns out he had gone through a divorce when his kids were young and while he was serving as a solo pastor. After he announced to his congregation that he and his

wife were divorcing, he started receiving all kinds of feedback from his parishioners. A few sent cards that let him know they were thinking about and praying for his family. Others didn't say anything, perhaps not knowing how to respond. And then there were some who left the church—or worse, stayed in the church and were generous with their criticism. He received a phone call at home one night from one such woman. “Shame on you, Pastor,” she said. “Do you have any idea what you are doing to your children?” Mike responded, “Actually, I think I do know what I'm doing to my children because I just put them to bed, and we wept together.” When it came to hearing feedback about his divorce, he did not need more condemnation; he had condemned himself thoroughly. What was missing, he said, was a word of grace.

This word of grace is what many divorcees or people contemplating divorce long for the most as they think about their marriages. Already laden with guilt or fear, they may dive into the Psalms, into the gospels, even into obscure passages, looking for a word of guidance, a word of hope. And if they happen to track down the passages where Jesus speaks on divorce, they will be led to the Sermon on the Mount – which is not particularly known for its words of comfort and “pastoral sensitivity.”

In the section I read today, Jesus does not tiptoe around the subject. He talks about the seriousness of lust, implying that there is a link between lust and divorce, that the downfall of many a relationship starts with an inward longing for someone else and a different life. Then Jesus goes on to say that any man who divorces his wife – unless it is on the grounds of her infidelity – causes her to commit adultery. One who marries a divorced person is guilty too, a participant in the adultery. Marital fidelity – staying true to one's commitments - is serious business for Jesus.

If I were to soften Jesus' words about divorce and apologize that he just didn't consider all the possible factors, or that surely he wasn't thinking of the dehumanizing effect one spouse can have upon the other, I would be stretching the text where it does not go. The bottom line in the Sermon on the Mount is that divorce is not what God ever intended for married couples. Broken relationships leave deep wounds.

It is tempting to think that perhaps if we were not to dwell on divorce so much and make it such a big deal, that it wouldn't be as hurtful and shameful as it is. And so, I think it is helpful to consider first *why* divorce is such a big deal for God's people. In the scripture passage, notice that *adultery* is the behavior to be avoided. The one who lusts has committed *adultery* in his or her heart. The one who divorces his wife causes her to commit *adultery*; whoever marries a divorced woman commits *adultery*. Adultery, or unfaithfulness, is the sin that Jesus lifts up in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. And why is adultery a sin? Why did it make the top ten in the first place? Because our lives are to reflect the opposite: we are to exhibit in our relationships the faithfulness, the “steadfast love” that God has shown to us.

So, to put it in the positive, we are to be faithful because God is faithful. I love the first scripture reading from Isaiah. Even to the wishy-washy nation of Israel, God said, “I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior....Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life” (Isaiah 43:3-4).

God's tender faithfulness toward God's people was and is our model for human relationships. Faithfulness in relationships is what we were made for, what we are called to.

As I said two weeks ago, the ethical commands named in the Sermon on the Mount flesh out our mission; they show us the distinctive, counter-cultural behavior that will be salt for the earth. The faithfulness we are able to show within committed relationships witnesses to the relentlessly faithful nature of God. And so faithfulness in relationships is God's hope for us – faithfulness in our sexual lives, faithfulness in our marriage commitments, faithfulness in our daily commitments and interactions (where 'yes' means 'yes' and 'no' means 'no.')

In fact, faithfulness is worth our right eye or our right hand. For Jesus, human relationships are precious, and we are to do everything within our power to preserve and be faithful in those relationships.

And so the question becomes, "What happens when we are not able to keep that faithfulness? Where is the hope, where is the word of grace, *and is there one* for those who are divorced or who see no option *but* divorce in a current relationship?"

Our hope lies not in the fact that perhaps divorce in a certain case is not a sin. Broken relationships, no matter how or for what reason they were broken, are a sign that sin is alive and well in the world. Our hope when relationships fail is that while we were sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). All of us are the recipients of the undeserved grace of God that pursues us and redeems our broken lives.

One of the most grace-filled moments in scripture is a story about adultery. A group of scribes and Pharisees – of pastors and Bible Teachers – brought to Jesus a woman "caught in the act of adultery." They hoped to trap Jesus in his own contradictory way of understanding the law. How ridiculous, how impossible it was, they thought, to at once uphold the law *and* be a person of grace. Well, first, Jesus treated the woman as a human being - with respect and gentleness; he drew something obscure in the sand, drawing attention away from her flushed cheeks and downcast eyes. Then, he told the self-righteous people around her that whoever was without sin should cast the first stone. One by one, they dropped their stones and walked away. "Has no one condemned you?" he asked. "Neither do I. Now, go and sin no more" (John 8:10-11). Jesus did it: he upheld the law against adultery, *and* he gave her a much-needed deep breath of grace.

Not one of us, even those of us who are not divorced, can claim righteousness in our relationships. We are utterly dependent upon the grace of God to act faithfully day in, day out, with our spouses. Yet, each day, all of us are called once again to faithfulness – whether it be in a first marriage or second marriage or in our relationships with our children or with our friends. God's mercy and God's call to us are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto us (Lamentations 3:22-23).