

## **Genuine Family Values**

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Oct. 7, 2018*

*Based on Mark 10:2-16*

*Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you 'Everyone who divorces his wife except on the grounds of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

We don't expect words like those from Jesus, do we? As a divorced man myself, I wish he'd never said them. They sound harsh, insensitive, judgmental, legalistic, wholly lacking in compassion and understanding — precisely everything Jesus was not. Yet Matthew, Mark and Luke all repeat these words. Even the Apostle Paul, who in his letters seldom speaks of the teachings of Jesus, remembers these.

Well, if you take this passage on face value and don't think very much about it, or don't compare it with other passages from Jesus about families, you might come to the swift conclusion that Jesus was an uncritical supporter of marriage and family and someone who would come out on the side of conventional "family values" legislation whenever it shows up under that moniker.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas used to open a popular class of his at Duke Divinity School by reading a letter from a parent to a government official. The parent complained that his once obedient, well-motivated child had become involved with some weird religious group. The group had completely taken over his life, forced him to forsake all his prior friends, and turned him against his family. The parent was pleading with the government official to intervene and take action against this disruptive group that had caused such difficulty in this person's family.

Then Hauerwas would ask his class, "What is this letter about?" The class usually figured it was probably about a kid who had dropped out of college and gotten involved with some religious cult. To their surprise, Dr. Hauerwas revealed that the letter was in fact, a mash-up of several letters written by 3<sup>rd</sup> century Roman parents complaining about a weird religious group called Christians.

When we think about Roman criticism of the cult of Jesus we never have it in our minds that their chief criticism was that Christians disrupted families, turning children against their parents and encouraging wives to be disobedient to their husbands.

No institution was more valued in the Roman world than the family. Not even the government. The family determined one's social and economic destiny. And the Christian church seemed, to Roman parents, to be assaulting the foundation of the Roman family.

Allow me to ratchet this up one more notch. If you're thinking, "Well, that was two centuries after the founder of Christianity started this movement. Maybe it had gone off the rails by then," remember how Jesus went about gathering his disciples.

Two brothers, Peter and Andrew, left their aging father in the family fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee in the middle of a day's work and went off to follow Jesus.

Yes, and whenever Jesus's own family enters the picture they enter in pretty unflattering ways. Jesus makes it clear to everyone that his definition of family is very broad. It includes way more than mother, father, brother, sister. It's everyone who leaves those people to follow him. And he says this right in front of his mother and siblings, too.

And look, he's moved away from Nazareth in an age when people usually stuck close to home. What I am saying is that if you are paying any attention at all to the life and teachings of Jesus, it is impossible to have a simple, "He said, it, I believe it," idea of what he taught and how he lived. He always is going way deeper with any issue that comes up in the public square than most people want him to.

What I'm getting at is that it is impossible to enlist him in any fight for "family values" since he is so ambivalent on the subject and so interested instead in the family of God.

Monday and Tuesday of this past week we had the Rev. Will Willimon here at Wasatch to lead a short workshop on preaching. Thirty-four local preachers and preachers from surrounding states, came to partake. He teaches at Duke where some years ago he was Dean of the Chapel. Here is something he once said on the subject of Jesus's complicated teachings on the subject of family.

*I recall having a discussion about how hard it is to pin Jesus down on this subject. A student responded rather oddly, saying to me, "I really find this kind of talk quite comforting."*

*"Help me with this," I asked her, "Why do you find it such a comfort? I thought most of that was downright controversial. After all, I love my mother, and I enjoy my family. Why would that sermon have been a comfort?"*

*She replied immediately. "I didn't know that God had any other plans for us than family. It was comforting to know that God may have something else in mind. I have been so depressed about my family. When I came here to the university, first thing I did was receive a letter from my mother telling me that she and my dad were splitting up. She said that they were only staying together until I went to college. I thought to myself, "Maybe I could have kept the marriage together if I had not gone to college. My 16 year old sister is making some pretty risky choices, and my older brother is in his second substance abuse program. I have come to the sad conclusion that I probably can't save my family. I didn't know before this that God may have something else in mind."*

How amazing that the gospel which sounds to some people like bad news, can sound to another like something very welcome indeed. It all depends, I suppose, on where you are in your long life, and what catastrophes you've survived.

I'm reminded of the Rev. Gary Demarest (a well-known Presbyterian pastor) who received a similar lesson when he was a young man and a very new minister. His first call was to be an associate at a church in Florida, and he recounted his first speech on the floor of presbytery. This was the early 1950s. He rose to speak against the ordination of any one who had been divorced. Scripture was clear on this, he said, both in the Old Testament and in the very words of Jesus himself. "It's a sin!" he thundered, "and if we open this door, what will follow?" He was 100% sure about this.

And then a few years later he went to his senior pastor with tears in his eyes and offered his resignation because he and his wife were getting a divorce. The senior pastor refused to accept it, as did the session -- unanimously. Some time afterwards, Gary said the following: "It was the community of faith that showed me the Gospel of grace and forgiveness that had always been there; I'd just missed it." '

You know, we in the church miss a lot of things.

Think again about those difficult words of Jesus we read this morning: "Whoever divorces his wife..." If we read them faithfully in their cultural context, they take us to another place. In first century Palestine men were totally free to divorce women—they didn't need a court of law. Wives, however, could not divorce their husbands; in fact, women had almost no legal rights at all.

What the first century called divorce, we would call abandonment or desertion. So, you can begin to see why Jesus sounds so shrill; shrill in defense of women.

So, let me ask you, do you think he is being liberal or conservative on this issue? I'm asking because it occurs to me that one could easily come down on either side.

He's conservative in that he seems to be against divorce all together, and he is liberal in that he realizes the impossible position women have been put in and, let me acknowledge, are apparently still in, to a great degree.

In Jesus' day there was a great deal of discussion about divorce and remarriage: What were sufficient grounds for divorce? Some rabbis, like Jesus, were strict -- only in cases of immorality might a man dispose of his wife. Others were more lenient -- a man could divorce for whatever reasons he saw fit, even if she was a lousy cook, according to the Hillel school. Women were legally considered a husband's possession. And men -- *men were never answerable to women for their actions.*

Let me repeat that: Men were never answerable to women for their actions. Should they be?

You would think I shouldn't have to ask that. But today, October 7, 2018, that question hangs in the air. It's the elephant sitting in the halls of every house of governance and every sanctuary of every church, whether the parishioners and pastors know it or not.

Anita Hill asked it of us 27 years ago, and the testimony of Dr. Blasey Ford repeated the question. Yes, and from a very high place in this nation the answer is, “No, men are not answerable to women.”

From the highest legislative house in our nation it has been declared that, “When it’s a man’s word against a woman’s word, the man is right every time.”

And the difference between the two Supreme Court nominee cases is: In 1991, Anita Hill walked alone, and today, Dr. Blasey Ford has millions of women who, like her, are not afraid to speak up any more.

History will not forget that it was an all-white male judiciary committee that guided this process and made it happen. That counts for a lot here. But, I imagine those men believe they have changed the course of history in this country for generations.

Well, let me remind you that the Supreme Court only has so much power. In March of 1857 The Supreme Court of the United States voted that a former slave named Dred Scott who was living in a free state, still belonged to his Southern slave master. The highest court in the land had spoken, and it was thought that this had settled the question of whether slavery was sovereign policy in the United States for generations.

Instead of settling the issue, the decision just stirred things up. Three years later we had a civil war, and we have not gotten over it. Not by a long shot.

Sad to say, we are still fighting that war. As William Faulkner warned us, “The past isn’t over. It isn’t even past.” Make no mistake about it, yesterday’s vote in the US Senate is really a vote against the gains made in the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s. It was a vote by powers that refuse to accept the founding creed of this nation, that all are created equal, no matter our race, or our gender.

I know that is a strong claim but don’t take my word for it, hear these words from an Evangelical pastor, Jonathan Wilson Hartgrove, who found himself in an ethical crucible because of the nomination of Judge Kavanaugh.

*As an evangelical who cut my teeth in politics during the heyday of the Moral Majority movement in the 1980s, I know the enthusiasm many conservatives feel at the prospect of culture war victories[ like yesterday’s at the Supreme Court. But I join many other faith leaders to oppose Judge Kavanaugh not in spite of our faith commitments, but because of them. As we read the Bible alongside Judge Kavanaugh’s record, we find his nomination a threat to the Christian ethic we are called to preach and pursue in public life ...*

*A group of evangelical women has issued a “call to pause,” asking fellow believers to step back from the rhetoric of “right to life” to examine how decisions before the court would impact the vulnerable people we claim to care about, even the unborn.*

*“The way to reduce abortion is not through escalating culture wars, but by reducing poverty,” they argue, noting studies that show abortion rates at an all-time low, though they remain highest among poor women who lack access to health care ... My evangelical faith compels me to challenge the way reactionary conservatives have hijacked our faith to serve their narrow interests. With Judge Kavanaugh on the Supreme Court, their 40-year effort to overturn expansions of 14th Amendment protections by the Warren court may be in reach. This will not necessarily save unborn children, but it will make life more difficult for minorities, workers, poor people and the L.G.B.T.Q. community.*

*When Jesus said, “I have come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly” in John 10:10, he was **not** thinking about a victory for those who have used religion to fight back against the gains of the civil rights movement. Jesus was inviting all of us to work together for the vision at the heart of that movement — a beloved community where all people created in God’s image can thrive.*

As Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski said when she announced she’d be a no vote on Friday, “We’re dealing with issues right now that are bigger than the nominee.”

Mark my words, that one sentence will be remembered long after the 45 minute speech of Senator Susan Collins on why she voted for confirmation is forgotten.

So, what are we to think? Two thousand years ago Jesus spoke up for women and it seems the men who prey upon them are just as likely to get away with it now as in his day. I’m sorry to have to point this out but I am the father of a daughter who called me early one morning nine years ago with her own story of being preyed upon. I’m the grandfather of a granddaughter. It is my job to do my best to protect them and I am glad Jesus is so clear on the subject, understanding my worries and also backing me up on the nature of the fix we’re all in.

Dan Rather, an elderly white male who is also the father of a daughter and who has had his eye on history for many years, wrote these words a couple of days ago once it was clear how things in Washington would turn out ...

*“I [took] a walk, to be alone with my thoughts .... Among the thoughts that emerge are these:*

*Cut through the clouds of the present, consider the long river of history, and one can see this as a breakthrough moment for women. To paraphrase my daughter ... “Women have never had a better moment to be heard in politics, to make a difference.” That is, if they—and those of us men who support them—seize the moment (if they don’t miss the moment as Senator Collins has.)*

*What that requires is that women and the men who love them ... adopt an attitude of “we can be beaten but never defeated.” Adopt it, cling to it and live it as a credo.*

Now, I've **not** forgotten that this started as a sermon about Jesus' teaching concerning divorce, teaching that has been used by the church over many centuries to bludgeon divorced people, mainly women. As a verse cherry-picked from the large body of words he said about family, it has been used in the name of "family values" both to punish women for leaving what are often abusive relationships, or, worse, to keep them in such relationships.

But no, it is **not** meant to weaponize the church in order to punish people who are already knocked down by life, it is a word of support for women who have so much stacked against them. If the church could just be as clued-in as Jesus is on this issue and offer support to the hurting.

With that in mind, let me close with these words from a fellow Presbyterian pastor, Rev. Stephen Montgomery ...

*Some years ago I was counseling with a woman who had gone through a particularly difficult divorce, and after a while she was ready to re-enter life, to get back involved in church and other activities. She said "You know, Steve, it's too bad the church doesn't have a ritual for those who are divorced. We have wedding ceremonies, but nothing for those who have gone through divorce."*

*"What would you want in such a ceremony?" I asked her.*

*"Well, something that reminds me that though I failed at one thing it doesn't mean that I am a failure; I'd want a ceremony that gathers a community around me that loves me even though I'm not perfect, and reminds me of God's love which leads me into the future with hope and new life."*

*"Oh, we have that," I told her.*

*"It's called communion. And everyone is welcome. The imperfect ones are most certainly welcome. Divorced, married, remarried, single, widowed, remorseful, sorrowful, guilty, those who keep promises and those who break them, those whose lives are in shambles and those who have managed to keep things pretty much together (for whatever reason, good or bad).*

*Jesus invites us all, for the church's final word on our failures is God's forgiveness. It is hope. It is resurrection. It is the new creation that God is fashioning which summons us, calls us forward and leads us to each other, into tomorrow.*

*Because, after all, God is more concerned with our tomorrows than our yesterdays.*

On this World Communion Sunday may we all take heart from that.

Amen.