

Preach on Marriage and Divorce, Pastor

by William V. Arnold

Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia

They are old themes in the church, and they are regular themes in our culture. But folks still want to know “what the church thinks” about divorce. Whether they know it or not, when the inquiry about divorce is made, people are also raising questions about marriage. To make statements about divorce apart from an understanding of marriage is an inappropriate divorce itself. The two cannot be separated if clarity of thought and intention are desired. Having revealed my prejudice from the first, let me now point out some of the things I would want to hear from the pulpit when the themes of marriage and divorce are addressed.

First of all, I want to hear a positive word about marriage. Not a sociological description. Not another listing of all the trouble that marriage is in. Not a psychological analysis of “what is going on” in marriages today. That can come later, and it probably should. But first, when I have come to hear a word from the church, I want to hear some words that remind me of what marriage is intended to be and why we’re “for it.” Those kinds of words are a rarity these days, and I’d like to be sure that they are still being spoken somewhere.

Now, let me say that I don’t think such words are a rarity out of conscious design on the part of preachers. The absence of such words is more a function of our cultural propensity to be descriptive about “what’s happening now.” The trouble with such a present moment focus lies in our failure to recognize that the description can subtly become normative for the hearers. Suddenly “the way things are” becomes “the way things ought to be” or worse, “the way things will always be.”

Help me avoid the temptation to lapse into such a mindset, good preacher. Tell me something about God’s intentions for marriage. Remind me that I am a finite creature who stands in need of companionship. Remind me that marriage is intended to be one of the ways in which that companionship need can be met. Help me see that marriage is more than “need fulfillment,” that it is also intended to be a form of service, a form of stewardship. Indeed it is a human reminder for the community of God’s faithfulness to us. Through marriage people can care for each other, resource each other, strengthen each other for the tasks of childrearing and caring for the creation of which we are a part. In that marriage relationship, God intends for us to learn more of who we are and who we can be.

For goodness’ sake, don’t paint the picture too rosy. After all, we are finite, and we are still sinners. There will be disappointments, but give me reason to work on the relationship in spite of the disappointments. Let me know that there really is purpose in marriage, rather than it being no more than a sociological, psychological phenomenon with only relative worth until something better comes along. In short, don’t worship marriage. Remind me that it isn’t

the cure for everything, nor is it even necessarily the most satisfying of relationships. Remind me of its purpose, and place it in perspective.

Let's admit from the first that there is not much substantive material around that helps us to work at this understanding of the nature and purpose of marriage from a theological perspective. Promises are made glibly in the fields of marriage and family, but most are reduced to descriptive "how to deal with it" presentations. So, when preparing to preach on marriage and divorce, take some time to carry out some careful theological reflection and study. There is a gap in the literature and in people's understanding. They (we) need to know why marriage is important from more than a functional perspective.

Second, when you preach on marriage and divorce, take some time to deal with forgiveness. If you do, you will join me in setting forgiveness as a priority over the area of "expectations." Many have written, and I have been among them, about coming to terms with our expectations of each other in marriage. After all, our disappointments and frustration with marriage lie in that very area. Straighten out your expectations. Face up to your limits. Lower your expectations. Accept your partner for who she or he is.

But it is beginning to dawn on me that expectations are a part of our nature. They won't go away. We deny them, repress them, reject them, and apologize for them, but they still hang around. And irony of all ironies—our expenditure of time and energy on them can wind up being quite self-centered! Coming to terms with our unrealistic expectations may further isolate us from a partner if we get too carried away with it. Theologically, we may well fall further into sin with such an overly introspective process.

More important theologically is the focus on the other person and the relationship. And hence arises the importance of forgiveness. Cultivating a spirit of forgiveness in a relationship contributes far more to the durability of the partnership than self-preoccupation with correcting my expectations. Note, too, that learning to acknowledge and accept forgiveness from the other partner is just as important, if not more so, than learning to forgive the other person. Forgiveness is far too complex a phenomenon for this brief article, but remember that such a focus brings far more richness to the relationship. And that is the importance of forgiveness—to place priority on the relationship rather than on one mate or the other.

Of significant help to the understanding and cultivation of forgiveness is the strong body of literature that has emerged on family systems. The fields of marriage and family counseling have made a significant shift in the last two decades from focus on the individual to focus on the "system" or context within which the individuals live. When a therapist works on the health of their overall pattern of interaction, health for individuals seems to come as a serendipity. It should be no surprise to us in theology, however. After all, we have been affirming the importance of the health of the "people of God" over slavish devotion to one individual for a long time. It is a natural deduction to place our emphasis on the health of the family rather than isolating one member for our attention.

One brief footnote to these first two points. Be sure not to place emphasis on marriage as the most fulfilling of all relationships. There are still large num-

bers of people around who have been hurt by or angered by the church's heavy emphasis on the importance of marriage. Single people, in particular, need to hear a word from the church that validates their lifestyle, whether chosen or not. And giving such a word is an appropriate theological move. Marriage is relativized in much of the preaching of Jesus and of Paul. We don't need to subtly or unconsciously, if not blatantly, elevate marriage to some sort of *sine qua non* for human fulfillment. If anything, we need to alert people to the dangers of moving into marriage prematurely and/or without appropriate understanding of the responsibilities and riches of the relationship.

Third, when you preach on marriage and divorce, spend some time talking about sin. We have already mentioned the importance of understanding our limits when we deal with marriage. But it is equally important to recognize all the things we can do to mess up a good relationship. No one should move into marriage without having at least some comprehension of what he or she can do to damage the relationship.

One way of talking about sin is as a propensity to distort our understanding of who we are. And one distortion is a denial or failure to recognize what we can do when we are concerned about "protecting" our self-interests. Good pre-marital counseling and good marital counseling will place strong emphasis on enabling persons to see some of the logs in their own eyes. Does this sound like I am coming back to urge introspection upon you? Well, the answer is "yes," but the intention is for the welfare of the relationship, not just the individual. Only as persons recognize and openly acknowledge their capacity to misunderstand and even inflict harm can they make an honest commitment to work to overcome those temptations/distortions and make a covenant to forgive when those times occur.

Equally important with recognition of our capacity to distort and harm is the importance of acknowledging our incapacity to control these temptations and actions alone. To confess that I am a sinner is to confess that I can't get it all together all the time. And so, calling persons in marriage to acknowledge themselves as sinners is to call them into reliance on God's strength in maintaining that relationship. Only by God's grace do marriages survive. Only as I confess my sinfulness can I rely on God's strength to maintain marriage. Only as I confess my sinfulness am I able to acknowledge my reliance on my marital partner.

Discussion of sin also prepares the way for a properly developed understanding of divorce. Divorce is one of the evidences or outcomes of sin. But divorce is not a special kind of sin. It is the same sinfulness that pervades all of us and pervades our marriages. We can't really say why one marriage survives and another fails. Perhaps it is due to genetic incapacity to tolerate stress. Perhaps it is due to poor environmental preparation for marriage. Parents provided poor models. The culture treats relationships in terms of service to the self. Perhaps it is due to a lack of commitment to or understanding of what marriage is intended to be. Perhaps it is due to those distorted expectations to which we referred earlier. Whatever of that list we may choose, all are manifestations of our human limitations and our distorted failure to take the limitations seriously. A further distortion is the failure to rely on God's grace ade-

quately. Again, that puts those who divorce in the same ballpark with those who do not divorce or even marry in the first place.

This sort of grouping does not excuse anyone from responsibility, however. Accountability remains. But now it is an accountability that calls all of us, never married, married, and divorced to a concerted effort to place marriage and our expectations of marriage in perspective.

There is one further word to be said about marriage. Marriage is a reminder to the community of faith of the responsibility we share for the welfare of each other. If it were only a private relationship, contracted between two parties with no other persons having any investment in it, marriage would have disappeared or have become a rarity long ago. Humanly speaking, the marital relationship represents the hopes of a community to continue itself and care for itself. When a wedding is celebrated, people breathe (some loudly, some silently) a sigh of relief that stability has been maintained, that children will be raised, that community will be preserved, that responsibility has been passed on, that a unit exists to render care, that someone will not be alone. The realism of such sighs may be questionable, but they surely occur.

In a more transcendent vein, the celebration of a wedding stimulates an important reminder in the life of the community of faith. God's faithfulness is symbolized in marriage. The "marital relationship" of Christ and the church reminds us of unremitting forgiveness. Hosea's lesson to us on the constancy of the intended relationship of husband and wife is also a lesson on the constancy of God's reaching out to us. To nurture the marital relationship is to nurture our own understanding and willingness to respond to God's faithfulness to us. Such nurture is not the sole responsibility of the marital partners. It is the responsibility of us all. For by that nurture we testify to the forgiveness and nurture we receive from God through Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we nurture and care for marriages in our Christian faith. We provide pre-marital counseling. We structure programs for the continuing support and enrichment of marriages. We initiate conversation when we perceive that a marriage is in trouble. We caution those who would enter into marriage to understand the seriousness of purpose which is involved.

With all those words being said—the positive word about God's intentions for marriage, the importance of forgiveness, the reality of finitude and sin, and the mutual responsibility we share for the well-being of marriage—we are ready to say a word about divorce.

I began this article by saying that divorce must be discussed in the context of our understanding of marriage. And divorce can only be understood properly in that context. Further, persons who divorce can be understood and responded to most appropriately when we understand the meaning of divorce for all of us.

Divorce, at the bottom line, is a failure. But the failure is more than that of two individuals who can't sort out their differences. Divorce is a "falling short" of God's intentions for us, and in that sense it is an evidence of sin. Because it is sin, the experience of divorce is one that places one in the human community, not outside of it. The appropriate response to divorce, in the final analysis, is grief. Certainly we may disapprove of particular things that one or

both persons did. Certainly we may complain that they should have “stuck with it” longer. Certainly we may be angry at folks who divorce because of the discomfort they stir up in our own lives. But, finally, after all those reactions have been acknowledged, the proper theological response is grief. Here are two persons who, for whatever reasons, have failed to experience what God’s intentions are for those who marry.

But there is more loss to grieve than that of the two persons. All of us have lost when divorce occurs. Our own limitations, our own distortions, our own failures to be supportive raise their heads. We are reminded of where we have fallen short in our preparation for and nurture of marriage. And, in the midst of that recognition, we are thrown back to reliance on God’s grace.

The temptation, of course, is to deny responsibility, to hold the two marriage partners exclusively accountable, to complain about “what the world is coming to.” Some will make speeches about the dangers of becoming “soft on divorce.” Fear prescribes “getting tough” as the solution to “the problem.” Fear drives us to think that showing sympathy will appear to be approval of what has happened. Not so. Grief and approval are far from being the same thing.

Grief is a joining together to affirm that “it shouldn’t have happened.” And that is where we are, isn’t it? Divorce shouldn’t happen. It is not God’s intention for us to suffer such pain. It is a testimony to the fragility of being human. It is also testimony to the importance of coming together to bind up the wounds of those in pain with reliance on God’s strength which exceeds any strength that we may possess.

Divorce is also a calling to us about good stewardship—the stewardship of human beings and the human community. Just as we are reminded of our limits, we are also reminded to use our gifts more effectively in the preparation and nurture of those who are called to marry. Pre-marital counseling, marriage enrichment, examination of our cultural norms with regard to both marriage and singleness—all and more are required of us. Attention to such priorities is ministry not just to folks who choose to marry. Our whole understanding of faithfulness and our acknowledgement of God’s faithfulness to us are bound up in this issue.

Divorce is a testimony to us of our human frailty. It is an experience which, if not shunned or ignored, calls us to more faithful insight into our own nature and our responsibility to each other in the community of faith. It is an invitation to us to work more carefully to incorporate those who are in pain, because they are more like us than otherwise. We may and should grieve with them and work for the day when divorce shall be no more, because we have understood marriage more clearly and relied on God’s grace more faithfully.

Preaching on marriage and divorce? These are a few of the things that I would hope to hear in the pew. The things I would like to hear rapidly have turned into a series of sermons! So be it. There are plenty of folks sitting in the pew who need to hear such words. And it is worth the increased attention when we understand that so much more than marriage is being addressed.