

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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Sixty Coconut Row, Palm Beach, Florida 33480

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THREE FAMILY SERMONS

III. "YOU NOW HAVE CUSTODY OF YOU: A SERMON FOR THE DIVORCED..."

TEXT: "And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart."

Galatians 6:9

My friends, for the last of our three sermons on the Christian family, I turn your attention today to the topic: "You Now Have Custody Of You: A Sermon For The Divorced." Initially I had subtitled it "A sermon in favor of divorce." While a part of me still leans that way, I thought better of it and softened the title to what you see here.

As a Christian Pastor, I am obviously in favor of marriage, and of the strengthening of the same. As the New Testament Epistles and Gospels universally teach, I encourage all couples to take their relationships seriously, to enter into marriage with "eyes wide open," not "shut" as in a recent movie. I ask them to protect and defend their God-given marital union, and to devote themselves individually and together, to set aside their selfish concerns and to wait out the present problems. For, while time might not change everything, the passing of even a couple of years can put a new spin on what were thought to be insurmountable difficulties. Needs and expectations, even anger and resentments change. I have often seen couples ride out the storm and find a new and sparking relationship together. Marriage goes in cycles.

Several years ago I preached a sermon at the Chapel titled "How To Spark A Marriage When The Kids Leave Home." It was a well thought out, well prepared and well developed Biblical sermon, (I thought.) It was a beauty. But I

must confess to you that I still to this day have not been able to implement its suggestions at home. Sparking a late middle aged marriage is hard to do. Not that Peggy would ever divorce me. Thank God for that lasting favor. She says there were a few times when she wanted to kill me; but then thankfully that also is condemned in the Scriptures. So I am safe, so far.

What is certain is that we all need to work hard at family and personal relationships. It can be a lonely world. The widely known author James Q. Wilson wrote a book recently titled "The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families." It is worth reading, if you have an interest in this subject. His thesis is that "The erosion of marriage is eating away at the foundations of our society". From the rich to the poor and all those in-betweens, children's lives are affected adversely by divorce. Their lives are also affected by unsettled homes and marriages and family relationships; e.g. the separation of father and mother surely impacts the child, but so also does the tension and anger in a bad marriage and a stormy home. My guess is that the same is also true with the souls and psyches of the partners who endure marriage for sake of the children, or who hang on following the hidden voices of parents, pastors and our culture. It is changing I know and the church needs to offer help, support and counsel and

guidance in support of stronger marriages. But my angle today is to have us look at the positive side of divorce.

I begin with a sad story. I am of course aware that we have an abundance of sad stories swirling about us already, so I apologize for my timing. This one took place in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania a long time ago. It happened up in Schenley Park in the Civic Center area, near the University of Pittsburgh and the museums. The Park was given to the city a long time ago by the Schenley Family, with the provision that it be used in perpetuity for the citizens and guests of the region. Some have tried to alter its uses, but thankfully they have failed.

I used to go to Schenley Park as a boy, on family picnics. When our children were young, we took them there as well. When I was a student at the University of Pittsburgh, I could look out at the Park from the Cathedral of Learning, and I used to walk in the park on my lunch hours.

There were, and are, lots of things you can do in the park: like ice skating, swimming, and hiking. I learned to play golf on the public course. When I was young, you could also ride horses there. There was a stable on the Old Oval. Up at the top of the Park, you could rent and ride a horse for an hour, for pennies, as I recall. We felt like cowboys riding all over the place, and racing back to the stable like Tom Mix, Gene Autry or Roy Rogers as the horses headed home. They felt safe there, which is part of the story.

One day, the day I want to tell you of, the stables, sadly, burned to the ground. I was out riding on yon side of the hill when I heard the alarm. The main stable itself was a wooden barn. That, and the stable master's house, and

two other barns burned to the ground. The pity of it all was not the loss of the buildings, but that some horses were trapped inside and perished in the fire. At the time the fire broke out, there were some horses tethered in their stall who broke loose and managed to get out. That was wonderful. Others had been tied so fast, and maybe were so frightened, and they could not escape...

But worst of all, there were still others, who as the fire broke out, were grazing in the paddock across the road. They were running free, safe as safe could be. They had carried around some would-be cowboys in the morning, so they did not have to work that afternoon. Do you have it? They were out of the stalls, across the road and safe.

But when the siren went off, and all the clamor and clatter of engines rushing up from Engine House #4 on Sample Street; and with the groomsmen and the stable-master and his employees, running back and forth and screaming for help, with others trying frantically to save the horses inside, (are you listening?) some of the horses who were free got frightened; and being bred through generation after generation of genes to believe that the safest place to be when trouble comes is inside the stable, their innate fear of fire was overcome by their fear of being free, and some of them actually ran back into the burning barn and perished. Some ran back into the barn and perished in the fire.

Now, that is sad. I do not bring it up to touch your tender heart-strings. I bring it up to make a point. I am speaking today of The Divorced. This story leads the way: The moral of the story is: If there is a burning house or situation waiting for you, you are better to be free, than to run back inside.

That is dangerous talk for a Christian pastor, I know, for me who works full time in the defense

of the Christian home. But I think you will understand why I say it when I tell you how I came to believe what I am about to tell you now. I grew up, as many of you who are my age or older did, believing (although no one ever taught it to me directly), that divorce was wrong, and that divorced people somehow must have failed. I cannot remember anyone getting divorced in our neighborhood when I was young. We did have some strange and peculiar people up there where we lived, (even in our extended family), but they usually managed to stay together for some reason or another. Yet we still inherited a feeling that somehow, if you were divorced, you were at least different. You had let God down, broken your solemn vows, disappointed your family, etc.

Then later on, after Peggy and I were married, I heard from a friend named Tom in Tennessee. He wrote to say that for no apparent reason, his wife up and left him one day, ran off to an artistic community at the oceanfront, saying: "Marriage is not my thing..." "Richard, she wants a divorce." I still loved and respected Tom, and while I did not know the interior of their marriage, I had every reason to believe that he was the same Christian man I went to school with. And, for the first time in my Christian life I had to say, "But wait a minute...If Tom is divorced, and Tom is still Tom, then there is nothing second class about being divorced..."

Next, I became a minister. When I was first ordained as a Presbyterian Pastor I was not permitted to marry a divorced person without appealing to the Presbytery Committee set up to review marriage applications. Some churches still follow that review process, many others refuse to marry a divorced person at all. I had to submit a detailed recommendation telling all sorts of personal and private matters.

Meanwhile the days turned into decades. I began to counsel couples, good Christian people in the Parish, who ended up getting divorced. Hardly a year passed but that some couple we knew personally got divorced. Then the present: last year just over five million people got married in the United States and within five years it looks like more than half of them will be divorced.

So, while I guess I grew up thinking there was something wrong with divorce, I came to see that differently. The millions of good people who are divorced are about the same quality folk and friends as the millions of people who are not. And if you want to talk about sin or difficulties, remember, the Bible says we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Careful, here I do not want anybody to run home now and say: "The Reverend said it's all right for me to divorce you!" No, you missed it if you get that. I simply repeat from our story: If your house is/was burning, if it is destructive to you, or to him, or to her, or to them, then you are probably better off being free, than running back into a burning barn. Of course, it would be better by far to put the fire out, but sometimes that is not possible.

I have come to believe philosophically, that the option of divorce can give strength to a marriage. If there is no option to get out of it, if you have to stay together just because people stay together, if you do not affirm and recommit yourself to marriage, then it is probably better to get out of a burning house, than it is to run back inside again.

To lighten it up a little. I told you once of our friends who years ago invited us to the 50th Golden Anniversary of his parents. It was a great party. Marriage was praised and celebrated! But a couple of months later, we

received a call from Tom asking if I would go and call on his parents, for "Can you believe it?" he asked, "My mother wants to file for divorce. After fifty years and two months?"

So I went. When I talked to his mother and asked her why she would do such a thing (are you listening?) she replied curtly, "You know Rev, I never could stand him and I finally got up enough nerve to tell him."

Not that it is easy. It is not. Divorce is difficult. The fears you feel in the open field can be acute, even debilitating. It is no fun being alone, like one divorced woman told me twenty years ago: "Oh, I don't miss him so much, but I hate being alone and having no one to go out with." The broken expectations, the guilt you feel, or that others try to make you feel, can be unsettling, especially at the start.

I will go further and whisper that when it comes to this subject of divorce, the Bible often appears not to be helpful in our time. It is the Word of God, but the Scriptures were written in a different time and culture. In most of the Old Testament, a man could divorce his wife whenever he chose. He could send her out of the house, just by saying so. (Deuteronomy 24:1) She had no appeal. The only way she could be rid of him, on the other hand, was if he had been diagnosed with leprosy. (Leviticus 13) It was the husband's world, indeed.

Then, in the New Testament, at a time when we want the love of Christ so much to get in the middle of our hearts and hopes, in two Gospel renditions it says that Jesus said there are no grounds for divorce, none whatever. (Luke 16:18, Mark 10:12) In Matthew, it says there can be no divorce except in the case of unchastity, i.e. adultery. (Matthew 5:32, 19:9) Furthermore, Mark and Luke add that, "If you remarry after you have been divorced, you have committed

adultery." St. Paul allowed divorce only on the grounds of an unbelieving spouse leaving and deserting the marriage. Then the believing brother, or sister, is "not bound to the marriage" and is free to remarry. (I Corinthians 7:15)

So, in brief, there at least these two grounds in the New Testament for Christian divorce: first, when a spouse is unfaithful. Second, when one or the other is deserted by an unbelieving partner. I think both of the Biblical grounds can and should be broadened. For example, one can be "unfaithful" in more ways than sexual infidelity alone; and one can surely desert a marriage in more ways than walking out the door and never coming back.

I am taking to those of you who are divorced. Marriage is difficult. The times in which we live put increased pressure upon marriage. Outside pressures come smashing into the marriage. Many times I have seen divorces where only one person desires it. Then what is the other to do?

With all that works against it, it is a wonder that marriage survives at all. I have a friend, who offers his wife a divorce every year for Christmas. That is dangerous. She has never taken it, but your wife might. You can laugh, or you can cry, but marriage is difficult.

Reinhold Niebuhr said it this way: in all of your difficult moral decisions: "By the time the Christian has a problem, the Christian does not have a good solution." Did you hear that? By the time you have a problem, if you are a Christian person, you have no good solution. And so you frustrate yourself forever, trying to find out what is the perfect, or the right thing to do.

It is not a matter of what is perfect or right. He meant that it is a matter of what is possible and pragmatically, what might work for you. We are

not seeking perfection, not in this world, we are seeking the possible. And there Niebuhr wrote "The best you can hope to do is to make the better choice." Or, he was even more poignant as he wrote: "You must choose the lesser of the two evils."

So, if divorce is wrong in your category, wrong it surely is. But something else can be worse, like a house that is burning. I guarantee you that your hopes and dreams, and you will perish, if you do not put the fire out, or depart.

And that brings me to the other people who are listening, who are neither married nor divorced, or who have remained married for a long long time or those who are in alternative lifestyles. The story of the burning stable still applies to you. It might touch you in a number of different places. I see all kinds of people hanging on to things that they should let go. They keep running back into relationships, or running back into dreams, or running back in to talk, or running back in to whatever it would please somebody else, right? I mean, if you go through college, or choose an occupation to please your father, I want to tell you that you will be asking someone five years later, asking: "Why did I do that?" God intends a life for you, and He does not want you to run back in either.

Or, it might apply to those of you who have lost someone you love. This is tender, I know. But I see people every day and so do you, who keep running back into their past. They keep living in their grief, holding on, as if that was the home which God prepared for them forevermore. But that is not the way God works. And, it can be just like a burning barn, if you try to live in the past. You cannot go back there. You have to get up and go on, not because you want to, but because you have to. For you might perish if you don't.

To some it could be a job... it is safer to stay where you are, in these times especially, but if you are stifled where you work, you must find some way to change it. To some it is a way of life, a style, an expectation. To some it could be a soul destroying habit. To others it is the same old gripe, your little personal pinto pony tied to the same old hitching post. Give it up!

Jesus Christ says, it doesn't have to be that way. "I make all things new. In Christ you are a new creation." I want you to have custody of you. To thine own self be true. "Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. What a person sows is what a person reaps...let us not grow weary in well doing; for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart." (Galatians 6:7-9)

So, just before we go...take a look around at where you are. Look to see what fires might be burning. Your first obligation, I repeat, is to help to try to put the fire out. But if it is raging and you see a way clear into open fields across the way, safe and secure, please do not be dumb enough to rush back into the burning barn. Christ can take care of you. He wants you to have custody of you. For now and forevermore, Amen.

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