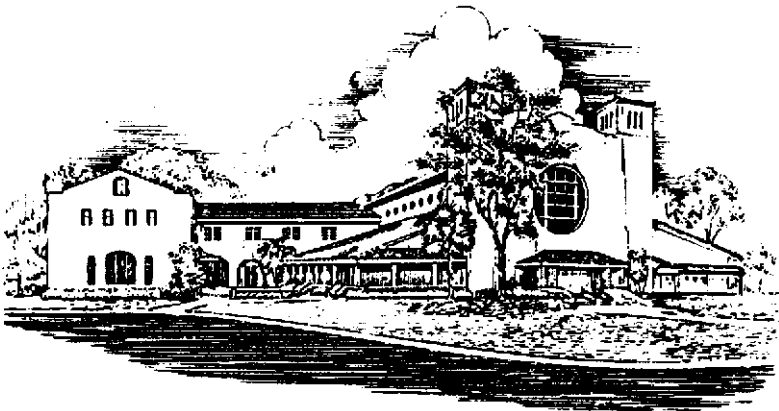


First Church Pulpit

**"IN DEFENSE OF THE DIVORCED
— A Fire, Some Horses, and a Stable in the Park"**

Text: "...but this one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and reaching for the things that lie ahead..." — (Philippians 3:13)



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

401 SOUTHEAST FIFTEENTH AVENUE
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA 33301

October 28, 1984

RICHARD M. CROMIE, Minister

My friends, I want to tell you a story that is sad, even awful, and it could bring tears to your eyes. It took place about twelve or fifteen years ago. Any of you, who have spent any time in Western Pennsylvania, might recognize the terrain I am speaking of.

It took place in Schenley Park, a vast area of hundreds and hundreds of acres, which were donated to the city by the Schenley family, with the provision that it would be forever used for the benefit of the citizens of the town; and because of a very carefully worded Will (Thank God for the lawyers who helped Captain Schenley), no one has ever been able to violate it, try as they will. A marvelous public park.

I used to go there as a boy on picnics, and when our children were small, we used to take them there as well. Then, when I was a student at the University of Pittsburgh, I could look out at the Park from the enormous Cathedral of Learning. There were, and are, lots of things you can do in the park, like ice skate, and swim, and play golf. And, when I was young, you could ride horses there. They had a great stable on the Old Oval, up at the top side of the Park; and for a few pennies, I think it was, you could take a lovely pony out for an hour, and feel like a real cowboy riding all over the place, and racing back like Tom Mix, or Gene Autry to the stable (I found out later horses always run when they head toward home).

But one day, the day I want to tell you of, the stables burned to the ground. I was there, about a mile over on the other side, when I heard the alarm. The main stable itself was made of wood. That, and the stable master's house, and two barns burned to the ground that day. And the pity of it all was not the loss of the buildings, but that some horses were inside; and they perished in the fire. That is sad enough, but there is still another aspect to it, which you need to know, and the story becomes sadder, and more mysterious.

At the time the fire broke out, I was later told (I was not actually there, I was over the next hill), there were some horses tethered in their stalls, which managed to get out. That was wonderful. Others had been tied so fast, and maybe so frightened, they did not escape... But there were some others, who were grazing in a paddock across the road, and there they were running free, grazing, and 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 free.

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

grazing in the field and entirely rescued, they ran back in, and perished in the fire.

Now, that is sad. I do not bring it up to touch your heart-strings, honestly I don't. I bring it up to make a point. I am speaking today In Favor of The Divorced, and I mean to make application before we are through. Maybe you have made it already, and you do not need the sermon now. But the message will be clear: if there is a burning house awaiting you, you are better to be free, than to run back into a burning house.

That is dangerous talk for a Christian pastor, who works full time in the defense of the Christian way of life. But I think you will forgive me, when I tell you how I came to believe what I am telling you now. I grew up, as most of you who are my age or older did, believing (although no one ever taught it to us directly), but we grew up believing that divorce was wrong, and that divorced people were somehow failures. Maybe not so strong as that, but at least they were different. I cannot remember anyone getting divorced in our neighborhood when I grew up. We did have some strange and peculiar people in the neighborhood (even in our extended family), but they all managed to stay together for some reason or another. We inherited a feeling that somehow, if you were divorced, you were different. You had let God down, and broken your solemn vows, etc. That was my inheritance regarding divorce and the divorced.

Later on I got married, to a wonderful woman, and about three years after we were married, we heard from a friend of mine named Tom, from Tennessee, a lovely man back then, and still, I guess: for no apparent reason at all, his wife up and left him one day; ran off to an artistic community at the oceanfront, saying: "Marriage is not my thing". Maybe it wasn't, but I still loved and respected Tom, and while I did not know the interior of their marriage then, as I do not know the interior of your marriage now, unless you tell me, I had every reason to believe that he was the same Christian man (He married again happily, and has wonderful children), 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..."

Then I went on into the ministry, and began to work with families and marriages (for almost twenty-five years now), struggling hard to keep families together, trying to keep children with their parents, and parents with their children, and parents and their older parents, and husbands and their wives together.

Now I am at the age (I am in my late, late forties), when hardly a year goes by but that one of our friends or another is divorced, often to our greatest disbelief. Then, when you multiply that, and put a great big umbrella over it; and realize that we had two wonderful weddings yesterday in this church; and you know that 4.5 million people will be married in the United States of America this year; and realize that

within five years two million of them will be divorced...(21.5 million people live in this nation who have already been divorced at least once, and who have gone through all that one must go through), and the fallout of that in the families, and the children, and the parents, and the brothers and sisters and the partners and friends...it is endless.

So, while I guess I grew up thinking there was something wrong with divorce, I've come now to see that differently. The millions of good people who are divorced are about the same as the millions of people who are married. And if you want to talk about sin or difficulties, then the Bible says we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

So, I put it in the context of this sermon. It is dangerous. I do not want anybody run home now and say: "The Reverend said it's all right to divorce you!" No, you missed it if you get that (Call me, if you feel like saying that). I simply repeat from our story: If your house is 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 run back into a burning house (It would be better by far to put the fire out, if that is 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.

Not that it is easy: ask anybody. It is not. I mean the pain you go through, the fears in the open field, alone, is acute. I do not want to put tears in your eyes, but the pain you go through with all the broken expectations, all the guilt you feel, and the guilt other people heap upon you, my goodness, it is as if the people you need the most are the hardest on you. They worry about you letting them down, when they should be worrying about you.

You parents out there: be loving and kind to your children, your daughter, your son, if in their time and the Providence of God, they are separating. Do not heap more coals upon their head. They have generated enough heat by themselves, and everybody else around them. Be kind and loving. Do not let your pride get in the way of your parenthood.

Next, I will go further and whisper that when it comes to divorce, the Bible is not very helpful in our time. It is the Word of God, but the Scriptures were written in a different time. 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. She had no appeal (The only way she could be rid of him, on the other hand, was if he had leprosy. 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, in one Gospel it says there is no ground for divorce, whatever. In another it says, except in the case of unchastity. Furthermore, one of the Gospels, and an Epistle

later concurs: "If you remarry when you have been divorced, you have committed adultery.

Now, I don't take the Bible lightly, but I have to wrestle with St. Paul on this one. It belongs in another context, as so many of the things which the Bible touches in the culture where it was, and which, in the love and power and presence and peace of Jesus Christ we have to re-interpret. We go gently, because we dare not run around re-interpreting the Bible, however and whenever we choose. But the more evangelical churches, and the Roman Catholic Communion still use a strict interpretation that divorce is so much an evil and sin, that you cannot be remarried at all, without committing adultery. With due respect, I think they are wedded to the past. The Bible says a lot of things, which belong to the ancient culture in which it was written. Much of it, say the Book of Leviticus, is charged with ancient emotion on dietary laws, and detailed instructions on behavioral, which only the fetish lovers could ever fathom now. It is dangerous to confront the Bible, but necessary at times.

So, I am talking to those of you who are divorced, or, when we print this up, if you want to send this to somebody who is divorced: Marriage is difficult. I do not need to tell you that. The times in which we live put increased pressure upon marriage, and outside pressures come smashing into the marriage. With all that works against it, it is a wonder marriage survives. I told you about my friend, who offered his wife a divorce every year for Christmas. That is dangerous, too. She never took it, but your wife might. You can laugh, or you can cry, but marriage is difficult.

Reinhold Niebuhr said it this way: "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 right: it is a matter of what is possible. We are not seeking perfection, not in this world, we are seeking the possible. And in that Reinhold Niebuhr, a great Christian theologian, said: "The best you can hope to do is to make the better choice." Or, he was even more negative as he wrote: "You 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, and I guarantee you that your hopes and dreams, and you will perish, if you do not put the fire out, or depart.

Which brings us to the other people I want to talk to. The story of the burning stable also applies to some other areas of our life. For example, it can be relevant to vocations.

Every once in a while, someone asks me: "What are you doing in Fort Lauderdale, Dick?" I say: "I don't know. The Lord led me here." (That he did!) "It was time for a change." I am speaking to those of you who are in vocations, to young people particularly. People fifty years of age come to me and say: "I have not enjoyed a day of work in all my life. I just keep going to work, to work, to work, to work... and pray for the weekend. Why didn't somebody tell me I could be free thirty years ago? Now, it is too late."

Well, in my life, it was maybe just as simple. I was getting used to the ministry I had. It was great. But it could have been too easy. Boy, you sure changed that in Fort Lauderdale! This is not an easy job. It has been a great year for us, but I have often thought that maybe I was prompted to get up and go, because I needed a new house to be in, in the sense of a new enthusiasm for new things to do.

I do not know what that will mean to you, but let me go on and speak to the young people listening. I see teenagers and college students hanging on to things for dear life, when they should let them go. They keep running back to 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 to please your mother, or take a position in the office to please your father, I want to tell you that you will be talking to me five years later, asking: "Why did I do it?" God intends a life for you, and He does not want you to run back in either.

And it applies to those of you, who have lost someone you love. I see people every day and so do you. They keep running back into their past. They keep living in the grief, holding on, as if the grief 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 out, not because you want to, but because you have to. And you will perish if you don't.

Which brings us right back to where we should be at the end, back to St. Paul. Paul had a tough, tough life indeed. He gave up his home, and his faith, and his family. We hinted last week that he might have lost his wife. No one knows for sure. He suffered persecution. He was beaten, driven out of towns, harassed, and eventually executed, for Jesus Christ.

And in his beloved words to his Philippian friends, he wrote: "I have learned the secret. They have whipped me, embarrassed me, isolated me, frightened me, harassed me, deserted me, and I am just about to die. But I have learned one secret: Forgetting what lies behind, I reach out to what lies ahead."

Forget. That is an active verb: You need to forget what lies behind, and reach out for what lies ahead: the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Forget, with a positive thrust, leave the past behind, and claim this new life, prepared for you by God Himself, in Jesus Christ, our Lord. For now and evermore. Amen.

16/28/84

