

NO LONGER TWO, BUT ONE

I was contemplating, with much fear and trembling, Jesus' words about divorce in this morning's reading from Mark's Gospel. Call it the "D" word, because nobody really wants to talk about it. If someone in the family gets divorced, it's not usually brought up around the dinner table at Thanksgiving as a pleasant conversation topic. A congratulatory card probably won't be sent to celebrate the event. No, divorce is something that's mostly kept quiet, discreet, hidden in the family closet along with all the other skeletons that are stored in there.

In 1968, Tammy Wynette had a number one hit single on the country music charts with the song, D-I-V-O-R-C-E. Do you remember it?

"Our D-I-V-O-R-C-E becomes final today.

Me and little J-O-E will be goin' away.

I love you both and this will be pure H-E-double L for me.

Oh, I wish that we could stop this D-I-V-O-R-C-E."

Poor Tammy Wynette. She couldn't even say the word "divorce." The word just wouldn't cross her lips, so she had to spell it out.

Now, granted, it's been fifty years since that song was recorded and released, and things have changed quite a bit since then. Society's views and opinions about a lot of things—including divorce—have loosened up considerably. And to some, divorce just isn't a big deal. Several years ago, I was counseling a young couple looking to get married, and the groom-to-be, sitting across from me in my office, looked me in the eye and said (and this is absolutely true), "We're going to try marriage and see how it goes, and if it doesn't work out we'll just get divorced."

That's about as casual, cavalier opinion about divorce as there can possibly be; but for many people, divorce is still a taboo subject. If it comes up we want to deflect it, to change the conversation to something more pleasant and uplifting. Yes, even today, divorce can be somewhat uncomfortable. It's can be kind of embarrassing. It can bring shame upon a person and riddle him or her with guilt. It signifies an unsuccessful, failed relationship. In not a few cases, divorce indicates or even outright proves there was betrayal and infidelity on the part of one or both individuals in the marital relationship. And

unfaithfulness isn't exactly something to be proud of and brag about to your family, friends and neighbors.

Some Pharisees came up to Jesus and, in a blatant attempt to entrap and discredit asked him, asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Jesus could have taken the easy way out, I suppose. He could have said, in all honesty, "Yes, it is lawful" (because it was), and left it at that. But as we all know, Jesus rarely took the easy way out. So, instead of giving a lawful, factually correct, one word answer, he responded to the Pharisees' question with a question of his own, to stimulate a deeper, spiritual discussion with the Pharisees.

"What did Moses command you?" Jesus asked.

"Oh, Moses was fine with it. He said all a man had to do was just fill out a legal form, hand it to his wife and throw her out of the house. Simple and easy. Bada Bing, Bada Boom, it's over and done with.

"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied.

Translation: "Yes, it's lawful for a man to divorce his wife. But just because it's lawful according to human laws doesn't make it right according to God's law—the law of love that God wanted to write on people's stony, calloused hearts. Jesus made it clear that the law allowing a man to divorce his wife was given by Moses for the sake of convenience. If a husband grew tired of his wife for whatever reason—perhaps she nagged him a bit too much; or maybe she put on more than a few pounds since their wedding day and he was turned off by the roll of fat around her belly; or the gray hairs and wrinkles on her face were beginning to show more and more and made her less attractive and appealing to him—just go down to the temple and ask a priest for form ESD (Easy Divorce)-01, fill it out, and leave it on her bedroom pillow before you leave the house for work in the morning. By the time you return home at 6:15 p.m. she'll be out of your hair.

Nothing could be easier—legally speaking.

But what about the emotional toll it takes on your wife?

What about the deep pain and feelings of failure and shame she feels?

What about the broken heart and the uncertain, difficult, fearful, financially insecure future that lay ahead for her? All for convenience's sake. All because the husband couldn't be bothered to work a little harder to improve the marital relationship. All because the grass looked greener on the other side of the fence. All because the husband wanted to take a bite of the forbidden fruit.

Yes, it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife; but just because it's lawful

according to human laws doesn't make it right according to God's law. Because we're talking about more than, cold, calculated legal principles here. We're talking about real, flesh-and-blood human beings and the damage they can do to each other. The hurt they can inflict on one another. The injustice that one person can commit against another human being, and the devastation it causes the victim.

Jesus made it clear to the Pharisees that the legal right of a man to divorce his wife and leave her in a lurch stands in sharp contrast to what God has in mind. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh."

I truly believe Jesus wasn't just talking about marital relations, about the sexual act that brings a husband and wife together physically and makes them "one flesh." No, I believe in my heart of hearts that Jesus was also referring to the spiritual union between a wife and husband—a union that's blessed by God. "One flesh" meaning putting that person ahead of you in importance; making that person a higher priority and loving that person at least as much, and maybe even more than yourself.

We have a word today for that kind of union between two people. It has probably been trivialized a little from overuse, but I think it beautifully sums up what Jesus was trying to say. That word is "soulmate." Being soulmates means being united to one another on a deeper, spiritual level. It means a much, much higher love than the brotherly love between friends, or the erotic love between two people who are physically drawn to each other. Being soulmates is the deepest, most personal, and most intimate love there is. Soulmates receive and give life to one another. They truly are "one flesh" in every sense."

At most of the weddings I officiate at, the bride and groom participate in a highly symbolic candle-lighting ceremony in which they each take an individual candle, light them, and together light what is called the *Unity Candle*. And while they are doing that I say these words: "As the flames of two candles are blended into one, so two individuals are blended into union with one faith, one hope and one love. May you, the bride and the groom [I do say their names] be one in heart, one in spirit, and one in happy destiny together."

That's just a different way of saying what Jesus said to the Pharisees: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh." No certificate of divorce, as legal as it is, can possibly dissolve that higher, divinely blessed union. We can try to fool ourselves with some silly divorce decree and try to convince ourselves that it makes a divorce legitimate, but we're not

fooling or convincing God. That's what Jesus was telling the Pharisees. Marriage is so sacred, so important, so highly esteemed and valued by God that divorcing your spouse is equivalent to cutting out your own heart.

"Therefore," said Jesus, "what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Some would say that D-I-V-O-R-C-E is no big deal. They roll their eyes and say, "Get real. Don't be a prude. Divorce is a reality, and it ain't going away." You can't really argue with that. As long as there's marriage, there will be divorce, because we're only human. We mess up. We make mistakes. We do things, on purpose or inadvertently, that can physically, emotionally and spiritually hurt, crush and deeply injure our spouses, and sometimes it causes love between two married people to die; or one spouse, in order to preserve their physical and mental health and safety, or that of the children, is forced to leave the relationship.

Yes, in our imperfect, so-called "real world," we fall short of God's perfect, idyllic concept of marriage as the genuine union of two people into one flesh. And when we do fall short and divorce happens, it saddens the God who created and blessed the act of marriage. God would like more from us. God yearns for us to do better. God would like us to have a deeper, more spiritual understanding and realization of just how sacred the marriage of two people is

God's will is for a married couple to make their best possible effort to work on and strengthen a marital relationship and strive to keep it going when they hit a rough patch—which, both being human, they inevitable will. God would like us to have more reluctance and hesitation to dissolve a marital union legally, except in cases of grave abuse and mistreatment, and do it only as a very last resort after genuinely making every attempt to preserve the marriage. Because, said Jesus: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh."

Or, like I say to the bride and groom in the candle lighting ceremony, "As the flames of two candles are blended into one, so two individuals are blended into union with one faith, one hope and one love. May you be one in heart, one in spirit, and one in happy destiny together." That's what marriage is in the eyes of God. Two people who become one flame. One flesh. Thankfully, if we fall short of that divine concept of Holy Matrimony and we confess our shortcomings to the Lord, we will have God's grace and mercy to offer us forgiveness.

No longer two, but one. In these days of easy, convenient legal divorces, I pray that every married couple, and every couple contemplating marriage, will take those words seriously before making a decision to end their marital

relationship or getting married in the first place, if there is any doubt. Because even if divorce is lawful according to human laws, it's not what the God who established and sanctified marriage desires for us, God's beloved children. Amen.