

“The Asundered”

World Communion Sunday
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Job 1:1,2:1-10; Hebrews 1:1-4,2:5-12, Mark 10:2-16

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 7, 2018, 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 22, dedicated to all children of divorce and to all men, women and children who have been abused and always to the glory of God!

“The Asundered”

Job 1:1,2:1-10; Hebrews 1:1-4,2:5-12, Mark 10:2-16

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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When I began praying through these texts for this sermon, especially the implications of Mark 10:2-16 several months ago, I was focused on Jesus’ words, *“those whom God has joined, let no one tear asunder.”* There is asundering in marriage. It happens. When 50% of marriages end in divorce, we need to get real about it. So, I was looking at divorce and the powerful implications for each person in the heart of divorce. The asundered are everywhere in divorce. Couples,

children and extended families all feel the effects of being torn asunder. No question about this.

We feel the effects and in our deep feelings, we need to remember the root of the word itself. The word “Divorce” itself comes from an old English battle term meaning, “the severing of a limb.” For the “asundered,” the pain of divorce is often so palpable that it feels like losing an arm or leg – or worse – like death itself. For others the asundering experienced in divorce brings surprising peace – no more fighting, no more difficult daily struggles and interactions.

Just as Jesus has a lot to say about divorce in Mark 10, it will not surprise you that the Bible has plenty to say about divorce, too. Quite frankly, most of it is hard to hear. From Genesis 1 and 2 running throughout the scriptures, divorce is viewed as inconceivable and unacceptable. God, who creates us to come together, clearly doesn't know what to do with those who are separated and divorced. This theme runs throughout the Biblical texts although counter-themes of trauma, infidelity, and abuse also run through the Biblical stories. These cross currents set up deep and important questions about the sanctity and sacredness of marriage and the effects of trauma inside marriage.

The Biblical running commentary on divorce finds its origins in Genesis as God creates Eve for Adam but plays itself out in the Levitical and Deuteronomic law codes and on into the prophets – Malachi, Jeremiah, Hosea, Isaiah. Jesus and the Apostle Paul don't lighten the load in the New Testament either – as has been pointed out in Mark 10 today. Like other parts of our life stories which scripture informs and sometimes seems to crash into, we have to find ways to extol the fullness of God's love in marriage AND beyond marriage.

Marriage was made for humans, not humans for the marriage. Therefore, when marriage fails to enhance and further the total well-being of the humans involved – when it causes hurt and constant pain – it must not continue. In other words, the torn asundering that happens IN marriage is not addressed well in scripture or by the church. We need to ask what is more important: the continuance of legal marital bonds or the happiness, nurture, and Godly designed human fulfillment of the partners involved?

Admittedly, the depth of these questions cannot be handled in a communion meditation. And I don't mean to treat the hugeness of divorce and the effects of torn asundered relationships with simple passing comments. Unfortunately, too the church has either remained silent about divorce (like an ostrich with its head buried in the sand) or made sweeping

pronouncements and created divisive rules that deepen the pain that was already present – which is how our passage deals with divorce today. Not helpful for too many in too many ways. For that I am truly sorry. For any ways that I have hurt you in the face of divorce, I ask your forgiveness.

The reality of being “torn asunder” claims more room in our lives and in Judeo-Christian scriptures than can be captured even in reflections on divorce. As I have looked more closely at “*Asunder*,” this word occurs 22 times in the King James Version of the Bible: 13 in Hebrew Scriptures and 9 in the Christian Scriptures. It is found in combination with break (twice), burst, cleave (twice), depart, cut (six times), divide (three times), drive, part, pluck-up, put (twice), rend, saw. These are the translation of 9 Hebrew, and 4 Greek words. It always relates to severing, almost always relates to harsh and violent separation.

The truth is – in scripture and in life – for one person to be torn asunder by being violated by another person or for two people to be “torn asunder” in marriage means that there is a spiritual, emotional, psychological and sometimes physical tearing in two that is not easily or ever mended. The asundered can be seen in divorce, but our world and our familial lives are filled with too many “torn asunder” stories.

We are torn asunder by war, by violent assaults, by many forms of abuse, and recently in social conflicts in our times.

Our national asundering has reached rock bottom in recent weeks as we have felt the terrible tearing in two of our nation in the Supreme Court confirmation hearings and yesterday the vote to place Brett Kavanaugh on the Supreme Court. It is impossible to not feel the angst, the pain, the tearing at the fabric of who we are as human beings and who we are as a nation and a people with values and convictions in the face of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's testimony and Judge Kavanaugh's response.

Depending on which side of this torn-apartness you stand, women and men across our nation are either weeping and wounded with the resurgence of memories of being torn asunder by another person or carrying on about the political mistreatment of men – particularly white men. Or they are saying all of this – and much more. Others of us and many of our families and friends have experienced the “torn apartness” of abuse – certainly brought home to many of us through the #MeToo movement this past year as tens of thousands of stories have emerged of trauma and abuse. I would add, for the ways in which the church has hurt you or knowingly neglected your pain in the face of trauma and abuse, I ask your forgiveness.

Each of us has some deep feeling about something we witnessed in the Senate Judiciary Hearings and Senate vote over the past month, but for me, I will always remember Dr. Ford speaking to the normalcy of these young men's laughter in the midst of the traumatic violation she was experiencing. To be torn asunder engages all our senses. It is not something that we just simply overcome. We never simply walk away from our asundered experiences.

I don't know about you, but I can't recall a time in my life as a citizen of this nation when I have felt, on a daily basis, more tearing at the fabric of who we are and what we believe and stand for than I have in the past several years.

It can be paralyzing. It is hard to move forward, to find unity and to heal as individuals and as a nation in our full throttle social media-fied world when the amplification of communication is in hands of one who seeks to divide and separate people. Nevertheless, we are called to do just that. We are called by Jesus and the values we hold in our sacred texts of scripture and our nation's central documents which set forth our binding values to unify and not divide; to bridge differences and not tear asunder those with whom we differ. Civility cannot simply be a thing of the past. Civility must guide each of our present steps into the future.

Perhaps there is no better place to begin binding the broken-hearted than in the final verses of today's passage – Mark 10:14-16. After presenting hard texts about divorce, Jesus calls the children to him for a blessing. He gathers them around him to teach and bless them. He knows they have all heard the tough stuff about divorce. He knows they all suffer the secondary effect of the pain of the asundering. So he calls them to his side.

The Lord of Life, the Messiah of the world sits down on the ground with kids all around and hangs out with them. He blesses them and offers them his best as a teacher and healer. He models for us what it is to get down to earth with the little ones.

It is in this same spirit that Jesus calls his whole church together at the table today. World Communion Sunday started 85 years ago in 1933. Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr, Senior Minister of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh called the global church to come together each year on the first Sunday of October at Christ's table. He believed that the church universal should come to Christ's table of love and grace to show our unity in Christ. It was a Presbyterian gift to all of us.

Although it started slowly, Dr. Kerr stuck with it and during World War II, World Communion Sunday caught hold. A world at war needed to find ways to gather in the peace of Christ and we who are in Christ, needed to celebrate our oneness in Him with all our brothers and sisters around the world. It was actually the troops across enemy lines in Europe who embraced this symbol of unity in the midst of the war. Amazing. The Apostle Paul tells us that we are to “discern the body” when we partake of Holy Communion, mindful that we note our relationship to all our brothers and sisters in Christ in this celebration.

In the asundered days in which we live, I pray that we find a way to healing and wholeness. Like Dr. Kerr, I hope and pray as we come to the table today seeking healing, seeking to be bound together in the places of our hearts and minds which feel so torn asunder.

My sisters and brothers, we need to overcome and heal from our asundering. Let's begin at God's table of grace. Come to the table just as you are. Come open to healing. Come and receive the grace and the love of our Savior here. Amen.

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