

STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY | SERMON

Mark 10:2-16 | Pentecost 19B | The Rev. Catherine Healy | October 3, 2021

Lately, my wedding ring has been getting a little tight. I recently took it off and swapped it out for my engagement ring, which is a size bigger. When I look at it, I think, often, about the year I got engaged.

It was 2009, at the height of the Great Recession. My soon-to-be fiancée Heather had just left her job to go back to school full-time, which seemed like a good plan to both of us until I was suddenly laid off from mine. Patching together our rent from unemployment and student loans had *not* been the plan, but that is what we found ourselves doing. And yet, we were ready to start building our future. So, with two plain silver bands from a mall kiosk, that is what we did.

2009, before I went to seminary, was also the first year I ever served on my church's vestry. My rector at the time invited me to run and then said, "There's just one thing. To be eligible to serve, you have to be a pledging member of the church."

I had never thought much about churches and money; growing up as an occasional churchgoer, I sometimes put a dollar in the collection plate, or sometimes a five if it was Christmas or Easter. But part of my training for vestry leadership was getting to know the budget. I realized that, like anywhere else, churches have bills to pay. My rector explained that in the Episcopal Church, parishes support themselves financially, so every time each of us sat in a heated and well-lit sanctuary, or held a bulletin printed on paper, or appreciated the work of one of the staff, we were all benefiting from the collective generosity of other members of the church.

I wanted to pledge. It seemed important. The problem was, we were broke.

I delicately pointed this out to the rector, who knew I had just lost my job. And he said, "We're not a dues-paying organization. The point is not the dollar amount. The point is to give generously."

If I remember correctly, Heather and I decided we could each kick in five bucks a week. It was a noticeable piece of our budget, and we felt it. But we also felt something else: a certain sense of ownership that I had never felt before. When I walked into the heated and well-lit church, when I held a bulletin in my hands, I felt proud. I had helped make all this happen. I had a stake in the place.

After that lean year, we both found work again, and we were able to give more. Then it was my turn to go back to school, and once again, we were able to give less. The amount of our church pledge has fluctuated with our income. But the point is not the dollar amount. The point is to give generously.

I would add to that: The point is in making the commitment. This ring on my finger cost about 20 bucks. If we'd had more, we probably would have spent more. But the value of the promise would have been exactly the same.

Today's passage from the Gospel of Mark is a tough one, because Jesus appears to speak with such harshness about divorce. And I can't imagine that there's anyone under this roof for whom divorce is a strange and distant phenomenon. The vast majority of us have divorce as a piece of our story—whether our own or the divorce of a close family member or friend. Most of us have known of, or experienced, a marriage that ended for very good reasons. So what do we make of Jesus here? And is there

any way these words can possibly still be instructive for us?

As we interpret these texts from two thousand years ago, and try to figure out how to apply them to our lives, it's always helpful to ask two questions: *What parts of this context are different now? And what parts have stayed the same?*

So many things about modern, Western marriage would mystify the contemporaries of Jesus. For starters, we live a lot longer. And, though marriage is still very much an economic arrangement, we no longer treat it as *primarily* an economic arrangement. No more are women considered property, to be transferred from their fathers to their husbands on their wedding day.

The rights and responsibilities of marriage are different now. Even *who* can get married is different now. I think most of us would agree that overall, these changes are good.

And just like marriage has changed, divorce has changed too.

But some things never change. The choice about whether to act in good faith or bad, with principle or with hardness of heart—that choice has always been with us. It's part of being human.

I'm suspicious of thought experiments about what Jesus would say if he were speaking to us today about the same topics. And yet, there are a few things we know.

We know that it's possible to be in a marriage with love and kindness, or to be in a marriage defined by cruelty and shame. The therapist Esther Perel writes: "Betrayal in a relationship comes in many forms: contempt, neglect, indifference, violence."¹

And we know that it's possible to end a marriage in a way that is selfish and callous, but that it's equally possible to end a marriage in good faith, with compassion and respect. In some cases, divorce is crucial for reclaiming *self*compassion and *self*respect.

Some marriages should be forever. Some marriages need to end. The most important part of that discernment is to act ethically, without hardness of heart, and to honor the value of the promise.

Every meaningful commitment that we make in this life—whether to a church, a partner, our family, our friends—is, in the end, an imperfect proxy for our commitment to God. All of the love we give and receive is a reflection of God's love for us.

I am here in this pulpit because I believe that the church, broadly, and this church, specifically, are worth making a commitment to. No matter how imperfect.

And although there is a lot in this church to be proud of—our excellent music, our beautiful space, our radical hospitality, our fabulous ministries with kids, I could go on all day—at the end of the day, we're not a dues-paying organization. If you pledge your financial support to SPR in the coming year, it's not a fee for services rendered.

Instead, it's a promise. That you value this community and will try to give generously so that others can be a part of it too. That you are committed to meeting God here, and caring for others here, with compassion and respect. That promise matters, whether the dollar amount is large or small.

I hope that you'll join me in making this promise. In the meantime, if you need to find me, I'm the one in the silver ring.

¹ @EstherPerel, Twitter, May 28, 2015.