

As we mentioned at the start of the service today, for the month of June, we're doing a sermon series called Everybody Hurts Sometimes. The inspiration for this series and format comes from those who serve in our congregation's ministries of pastoral care, who have observed that these are issues that have or will affect nearly every person in our community in some way.

Of course, divorce, addiction, domestic abuse, and suicide are issues that affect all humans with whom we share this planet. There is nothing exclusively Christian about these topics. My task as a preacher is to put these topics into conversation with biblical texts and our theological tradition. And so admittedly, I will necessarily be doing a great deal of what preachers call eisegesis in these sermons. In each one, I am starting with a topic in mind and then seeking out biblical texts that speak to that topic. There is nothing inherently wrong in such an approach, but it does lend itself to much of the preacher's personal views crowding their way into the preaching, which may or may not always be in line with the views of the Holy Spirit. So as always, my prayer is that where my words are the words of the Spirit, they might take root and be watered and bear good fruit that will last, and where my words are not the words of the Spirit, they may be scattered and quickly forgotten.

One of the great privileges of my calling as a pastor is leading wedding services. Each wedding is as beautiful

and as different as the couple themselves. I've led weddings in churches and on beaches and in backyards. But no matter the setting, whether formal or causal, I've noticed something. At a wedding, people put more thought into their clothing than for any other occasion.

And it's not just the bride and groom. Everyone thinks carefully about what they will wear to a wedding, even the officiant.

And if you've been to enough weddings, you know that sometimes, despite our best laid plans, wardrobe malfunctions happen. Even I myself, as the officiant, was once victim to an unfortunate zipper incident. It happens. But at a wedding, everyone thinks carefully about what they will wear.

And that brings us to our text this morning from the letter to the Colossians. It's a text that is frequently requested by couples to be read for their wedding service, probably second in popularity only behind 1 Corinthians 13. So listen now for a Word from God.

*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you*

*were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

I don't have an exact figure, but I'd estimate that conservatively, I've personally officiated somewhere between 100 and 200 weddings thus far in my career.

And I am convinced beyond any doubt that on the day that each of those couples made their solemn vows before God and their witnesses, they had every intention of fulfilling them until death do they part. They did not enter into their marriages under duress or with any reservations whatsoever. When they made their vows before God and their families and friends, they meant them.

But you already know what I'm going to say next. Again, I don't have an exact figure, but more than a handful of those marriages that I solemnized have ended not in death, but in divorce.

And I'd wager that there is not a single person in this room who has not been personally affected by a divorce. Whether you've been the petitioner or the respondent or a child or a friend or

family member, divorce has and will affect every single one of us in some way or form.

Not all divorces are tragic, of course. In some cases, divorce is a pathway that painful as it may be, eventually leads to healing and wholeness. But make no mistake, even in the most amicable of circumstances, divorce is painful because it involves a kind of death. For the couple, it's a death of the dreams they had for their marriage on their wedding day. For the family and friends of the couple, divorce permanently alters relationships, much in the same way a death does.

Divorce, of course, is not a new legal concept. In the book of Deuteronomy, which is at least 2,600 years old, there are specific provisions written about divorce, as there are in other law books from other ancient cultures.

And so if divorce is nothing new, and if divorce affects every human being in ways both large and small, what, if anything, can we say about it as people of faith?

For us, as people of faith, marriage is not a contract. It's more than a legally binding agreement between two people. For us, marriage is a covenant, and for us, there are three parties to the covenant, not just two.

As people of faith, we believe that God is the first actor in every covenant. It was God who created all that is, seen and unseen, by speaking a word. It was

God who made covenant with both Noah and his family and with all of creation after the flood. It was God who made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah to make of them a great nation. It was God who promised David that his descendant would rule over Israel forever, and of his kingdom there would be no end.

God has never broken a covenant. Not once.

We, on the other hand, are not so good at the keeping of the covenants.

When God gave the people the law, and God said to them, If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession in all the land, the people said, “Everything the Lord has said we will do.” But Moses hadn’t even come halfway down the mountain and the people were already worshiping a golden calf. King David was said to be a man after God’s own heart, but he lusted after a woman named Bathsheba, impregnated her, had her husband Uriah killed off, and then lied about the whole sordid affair. Jesus told Peter that he was the rock, and on the rock he would build his church. But when the chips were down, Peter denied ever knowing the name Jesus. Not once. Not twice. But three times before the rooster crowed. And the list goes on and on.

And so it seems to me that as people of faith, we can say that God is the initiator of every covenant, including the marriage covenant. And God has not ever broken a covenant – not once. But we are not so good at keeping of

covenants, and so when a marriage ends not in death, but in divorce, it’s because one or both of the humans in the marriage stopped serving it.

That’s the argument that Jesus was making with the Pharisees. The Pharisees, in some sense, would have made good Presbyterians. They knew their Scripture and took it seriously. They valued doing things decently and in order. And so they tried to trap Jesus with a hypothetical, based off of Deuteronomy 24, which permits a man to divorce his wife under certain conditions.

Notice, by the way, that it’s a one-way conversation. It says nothing about a woman’s rights. As our own Book of Confessions reminds us, the Scriptures are the Word of God, but they’re also the words of men, and they were conditioned by the culture and thought and forms that were then current when they were written. And in the time in which the Scriptures were written, women were viewed as property, either of their fathers or their husbands.

And so when the Pharisees present Jesus with their hypothetical, that’s how they’re framing it. But Jesus cuts right through it. He says, “It’s because of human hardness of heart that divorce happens, not because it was God’s plan or design.”

I would be remiss if I didn’t pause and note some of the interpretive history of these kinds of texts over the years. As people of faith, we take Scripture seriously, as we should. But people have

pointed to these and a few other texts and used them to tie up heavy burdens on already broken hearts. As Presbyterians, our own Confessions teach us that all Scripture is to be interpreted in light of Christ's work of reconciliation. So let us repent of all the ways that our sisters and brothers in Christ have used Scripture in ways that drive people away from God and one another, rather than to God and each other.

My friend, whether you're married or single, whether you're divorced or separated, whether you're old or young, the wisdom of the letter to the Colossians applies to us all. Every day, you have a choice about what clothes you will wear, about what you will show to the world.

My friend, I can't begin to tell you how crazy God is about you. You are God's chosen one. You are God's beloved. There's nothing God wouldn't do for you, and there's nothing God wouldn't give for you, including God's very self in Jesus Christ.

And so, my friend, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, let us clothe ourselves with compassion.

Let us clothe ourselves with kindness.

Let us clothe ourselves with humility.

Let us clothe ourselves with meekness.

Let us clothe ourselves with patience.

Let us bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, let us forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven us, so we also must forgive.

Above all, let us clothe ourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

And may the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, to which indeed we were called in the one body.

Thanks be to God. Amen.