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Sermon by the Reverend Hope Eakins

St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

The Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." It was the beginning of creation, and it was a good beginning - until the snake entered the scene and offered the forbidden apple to Eve. Eve then passed it on to Adam, and once Adam realized what was happening, once Adam knew what trouble Eve had started, the one question he wanted to ask God was likely the one posed in today's Gospel: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

In the Gospel story, it was the Pharisees who asked Jesus the question, and it was a silly question really, for of all people, the Pharisees knew the rules. They knew that under Mosaic Law a man could divorce his wife if there were something "objectionable" about her. Yes, divorce was lawful; what was in question was the reason for it. Some Jews held that the only grounds for divorce were a wife's adultery; others permitted divorce if a wife did not bear sons or if she argued loudly enough to be heard in the next house. Jesus refused to be drawn into these disputes. He told the Pharisees that none of these reasons mattered because no law, not even that of Moses, could separate what God has joined together.

Now the Pharisees knew their Scripture well. They knew that Adam and Eve didn't live happily ever after. There was the matter of that apple and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and divorce was not the worst result of it all. God does not want divorce, but neither does God want murder or greed or injustice, all of which abounded after Adam and Eve left Eden. God does not want us to sin, but we do. Jesus told the Pharisees that arguing about the legality of divorce misses the point that God never wants us to betray each other or fail each other or hate each other - but we do.

Although the Bible is clear that God wants covenants of love to be eternal, the Bible is ambivalent on the subject of divorce. Is divorce lawful? Moses said yes, but only at the husband's instigation. The prophet Malachi thundered that God hates divorce because it is an act of violence. But then Ezra the priest, lamenting how the men of Israel married women of foreign races and beliefs, said, "Get rid of those foreign wives and send them away." In the New Testament, St. Paul counsels Christians married to non-believers to keep their marriages intact for the sake of the children, but if that doesn't work, he says, divorce is one choice among a lot of difficult choices.

The Bible speaks with many voices about what to do when a covenant is ripped asunder, and so has the Episcopal Church. Until 1973, divorced people were not allowed to remarry in this Church, and so sometimes divorced people would go to the church down the hill, get married, and come back to join their Episcopal congregation the next Sunday. When the hypocrisy of that practice became glaringly apparent, our General Convention voted to allow remarriage with the consent and approval of a Bishop. Why? It was because sometimes human beings fail to live up to God's will and their own good intentions; because although divorce is never a good thing, sometimes it is the best thing; because sometimes marriage is more destructive than divorce.

So when Jesus said, "what God has joined together, let no one separate," he wasn't talking about the realities of marriage in the here and now. He was talking about life in the Kingdom of God. Jesus kept pointing to that Kingdom, kept promising it, kept showing us the signs of that Kingdom, signs of hope and healing breaking into our world, but God's Kingdom is not here yet. "There's a good time coming," Jesus said, good enough to try to live according to the law of love he was writing on people's hearts.

Jesus was not promising a Kingdom that awaits us one day way up yonder. He said the Kingdom was coming on earth as it is in heaven. He didn't call the disciples away from their ordinary lives to a new life; he showed them that their ordinary lives were made new when they lived with hope. The kingdom of God is at hand, he said, the way a field has treasure buried in it. We know about it because we see it in our best dreams and our truest prayers. The Kingdom of God is our home and we are homesick. In God's kingdom we are all one family, which means

we can fight like the cats and dogs in our pews and drive each other crazy because we know that deep down we belong to each other and can't imagine what life would be like without each other. In the Kingdom of God, we remember why we love each other and believe that love is strong enough to bind together whatever is broken, that love is wide enough to forgive, that where there is love there is God.

Those who hear Jesus' words live as though God's Kingdom is on its way. If all there is is what we've got, it's not very much and we'd better look out for Number One. Why share your assets with the poor if you might lose your job some day? Why stick with a marriage that doesn't satisfy if there's glamour around the corner? Why tell the truth if it can get you in hot water? Why forgive your enemies? But if God's Kingdom IS coming, or when we live AS IF God's Kingdom is coming, suddenly everything gets turned upside down and losing becomes finding and crying becomes laughing, the last become first and the weak become strong - and life starts to look like heaven on earth.

So how do we live like the Kingdom is breaking in this day? Here are some ideas. If you are married, strengthen and nurture your union; give thanks for your spouse. Remember that being married is more important than being right. Forgive and forgive and forgive some more. Spend time together and play and play some more. If you have difficulty doing that, seek help before your eye starts to wander and the grass looks greener in unexplored pastures. If you wait until the battle lines have been drawn and fierce recriminations have been spoken, it is probably too late.

If you are divorced and have some free-floating anger or resentment or guilt, you need to confess your own faults that contributed to the failure of your marriage. "Until death do us part," you said, and you are bound by your vows until that day. Even if you have remarried, even if your former spouse is a scoundrel and a cheat, you are still committed to pray for the scoundrel's welfare and to button your lip so you don't dishonor the cheat.

If you are single, you share the responsibility of us all to make this society a place where commitment is taken seriously and marriage is valued and divorce is never seen as an easy out. You need to vote and to consider your vote carefully and decide whether candidates who crow about their infidelity should hold public office. And all of us who have ever attended a wedding and answered the question, "Will you support this couple in their new life in Christ?" need to be serious about giving that support.

God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper as his partner." God knows we need each other, and so God has put us in relationship with each other. What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.