

A colleague of mine tells of the time that Ann came into his office. Ann was visibly upset. She had tears in her eyes and said, "There's something I have to tell you, pastor." Ann and her husband were members of the church. She began attending a mid-morning Bible study at the church.

One day while doing her homework, she came across some difficult words in the Sermon on the Mount that troubled and confused her. She then told the minister through her tears that she had been married previously. It was a terrible mistake. She got a divorce.

The minister responded to Ann by asking, "Ann is that what's bothering you, that you've been divorced?" The minister then responded, "Ann, I know many people who are divorced, including several of my best friends. Why would this news jeopardize their friendship?"

And then Ann pulled out her Bible, turned to one of two places she had bookmarked and read these words of Jesus from the 5th chapter of Matthew's gospel. From Matthew 5:32, she read, "But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

Then she added, "I had hoped that the other gospels were less harsh. Instead, I found these words from Mark 10:11-12 which read, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

And then Ann asked her minister, "Is that what I am? Am I an adulteress in the eyes of Jesus? Can you see why I'm worried about our friendship? Do you think I am an adulteress?"

In the 1950s, the Presbyterian Church struggled with this issue. Divorce was becoming more and more common and people were going to their ministers and telling them that they wanted to be married again. But back in the 1950s, Presbyterian law prevented Presbyterian ministers from performing marriages for people who were divorced.

The Presbyterian Church debated the issue and decided to change our constitution and permit its ministers to decide on their own if they wanted to perform weddings for people who were divorced. Clarence Macartney, a leading voice in the Presbyterian Church at the time and pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburg, PA wrote: "I never thought I would see the day when such un-Scriptural revisions of the standard of our church would be allowed."

So beginning in the 1950s, Presbyterian pastors were given permission to perform weddings of people who were divorced if those pastors felt that those marriages were faithful marriages. They did not have to perform marriages of people who were divorced. But they were no longer barred from performing those marriages.

I, for one am thankful to be Presbyterian. I am thankful that in the Presbyterian Church we do not shy away from difficult issues. And over time we realized that God gives 2nd chances. That God can bring two people together after they experience the pain of divorce and that the church can bless their relationship in the name of Jesus Christ.

The Presbyterian Church is once again in the news. Isn't it always fun when we are in the news? A majority of our 173 presbyteries have approved an amendment which removes language that pastors and elders have to either practice fidelity within the covenant of marriage or chastity in singleness. Individual churches and presbyteries can still require that language when we choose elders and pastors but we are not required to abide by that language.

In other words, individual churches, Sessions, and presbyteries decide our standards which we each believe are biblical and faithful to our Presbyterian constitution. An affirmation of states' rights, if you will, and less intrusion from a national governing body. Some celebrate that local bodies have greater authority while others wish that the national body would provide greater oversight and biblical interpretation. Some say our church's actions show greater faithfulness to Scripture while others say we have turned away from the authority of Scripture and too easily to cultural influences.

That names our recent past. And I debated whether or not I would say anything today from the pulpit about all of this. We had an open discussion about this topic a couple of weeks ago and you have received some written information. And if we need to talk more about all of this as a congregation then we can talk more about this.

Some may feel a need to share your concerns with others who are like minded. Some may feel a need to grieve with others who are like minded. Some may feel a need to celebrate with those that are like minded. But that's what people always do when conflicts arise. We get together with people that think like us so that we can have our opinions validated by people who think like we do.

Some people who are conservative all get together. Some people who are liberal all get together. Some people who are moderate all get together. Some people who are moderately liberal all get together. Some people who are moderately conservative all get together. Some people who are somewhat moderately liberal all get together. Some people who are somewhat moderately conservative all get together.

Some people who are anarchists all get together. Some people who are separatists all get together. And so we form our little cliques of people that are like us. I do it. And you do it. We all do it. It just feels so right and superior.

But you know what. Hanging out with people that think like us is not where I think the church is called to be. We are not called to form tighter and tighter cliques. We are called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ out into a world which is hungry to hear and experience the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Christ who reached out to people that were shunned, shamed, and cast aside.

Did you hear that Acts passage read? Read Acts 2:44-47 again.

We gather around a table to celebrate communion. Jesus did not live and die only for people who were conservative or liberal. Jesus did not live and die only for people that were Catholic, Baptist or Presbyterian. Jesus did not live or die only for people who were straight or gay. Jesus did not live or die only for you and me and people who think like you or me.

Jesus came for all of us. And at this table we are all welcomed.

Because at this table we are all sinners saved by the grace of God through the love, forgiveness, and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. AMEN.

-Story from Butzer, Albert G. III, *Presbyterian Outlook*, April 18, 2011, p. 16-18

-Text: Acts 2:43-47

-Given: May 15, 2011 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)