

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
March 8, 2026 – The Third Sunday of Lent
John 4:5-42
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This morning I want to talk about the sacramental rite of Holy Matrimony and also about divorce. But before that, let's look at the lesson we just heard from the Gospel of John – the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. It is important to keep in mind when we hear this story how startling it is that Jesus was talking to a Samaritan and a woman. Jews looked down on Samaritans. They weren't pure Jews. Ancient Jewish literature warned against Jewish contact with Samaritans. Jesus, a good Jew, should have avoided contact with any Samaritan. Not only that, but he was also not supposed to even greet a woman. Again, ancient Jewish literature warned men against talking much to women, even their wives! So, no wonder that both the Samaritan woman and Jesus' disciples were surprised at Jesus' long and profound conversation with the woman at the well.

As soon as their conversation begins, it is clear that Jesus and the woman are speaking on different levels. He is speaking about living water – “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” – and she's talking about buckets and how deep the well is. He is talking about salvation, and she seems to be thinking about how she might avoid some hard physical work. They don't “connect” on the subject of water. So, Jesus changes his approach, like a good teacher who sees that her students aren't “getting it.”

Jesus says, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman replies that she has no husband. Then Jesus really gets her attention, by telling her what he could not have known by ordinary means: she has had five husbands and the man she is now living with is not her husband. Amazed, she calls Jesus a prophet. In the Gospel of John stories of “miraculous” events always transform people and show them that Jesus is the Messiah. Even though Jesus tells the woman in plain words that he is the Messiah, what convinces her is the fact that he has “told her everything she has ever done.” That makes her run off and tell others about Jesus. She becomes a missionary to her own people.

This is a very rich Gospel passage with many lessons for our lives as disciples of Jesus. One important lesson for our day is that Jesus' mercy and the salvation he offers human beings is not bound by human ideas of who is “in” and who is “out.” Jesus has come to offer salvation to all. There is no place in God's vision of humanity for prejudice, hatred, or contempt based on someone's race, religion, nationality or gender. What matters to Jesus is different from what matters to “the world.”

Now to the sacramental rite of Holy Matrimony. Perhaps the most succinct summary of what the Episcopal Church teaches regarding Christian marriage is found in “The Declaration of Intention” that a couple signs before being married in the church. “We understand the teaching of the church that God's purpose for our marriage is for our mutual joy, for the help and comfort we will give to each other in prosperity and adversity, and, when it is God's will, for the gift and heritage of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of God. We also understand that our marriage is to be unconditional, mutual, exclusive, faithful, and lifelong; and we engage to make the utmost effort to accept these gifts and fulfill these duties, with the help of God and the support of our community.”

In Holy Matrimony the two persons make promises to one another, to the community of the church, and to God. As I said in speaking about Baptism, Confirmation, and Ordination, in

the sacraments and the sacramental rites of the church we declare in words our intentions about how we will live our lives. The promises we make in every case are very good but also challenging to fulfill. Think, for example, of this promise we make when we renew our Baptismal Covenant: "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" We answer, "I will, with God's help." We definitely need God's help to live the words we speak.

The reality is that we often fail to keep the promises we make, even when we make them in good faith and when we pray for God's help. In the case of marriage, that failure often ends in divorce. I'm sure every one of us has been touched by divorce – we may be divorced ourselves, have parents or children or other relatives who are divorced, friends who are divorced, and so on. Though divorce may be the best outcome for a couple, divorce often causes pain for many people, pain which can be heartbreaking to experience or to witness.

What is the view of the Episcopal Church regarding divorce? Our church approaches divorce with a pastoral mindset, recognizing the complexities of human relationships and the need for compassion. In this book, "Women's Uncommon Prayers," by the Council of Women's Ministries in the Episcopal Church, we find a "Liturgy for Divorce." Like the sacramental rite of Holy Matrimony, this service takes place in the church community. The purpose of the service is to acknowledge a legal divorce and give the couple the opportunity to release one another from their vows of marriage. A few quotations will give you a general sense of the service. The clergy person says: "While this couple have promised in good faith to love until parted by death, in some marriages the love between [a married couple] comes to an end sooner. Love dies, and when that happens we recognize that the bonds of marriage, based on love, also may be ended. God calls us to right relationships based on love, compassion, mutuality, and justice. Whenever any of these elements is absent from a marital relationship, then that partnership no longer reflects the intentionality of God. Thus, we gather this day to support and bless [the two partners] as they confess their brokenness, forgive each other for their transgressions, receive God's blessing ... and make commitments for a new life" (pages 352 to 356). Each of the partners declares that he or she has parted from the other of his/her own free will, repenting and seeking forgiveness for forsaking their vows and for the pain caused to the other partner.

Certainly, this service is meant for people who divorce amicably and with good will. Is that true in most cases? Probably not. But I think this Liturgy for Divorce is important because it acknowledges the reality of human failure and the appropriateness of asking for God's forgiveness and mercy when the vows of Holy Matrimony cannot be kept, as in every case when we fall short in life and need God's forgiveness and mercy.

In our church being divorced does not prevent a person from receiving any sacrament or sacramental rite, including Ordination or remarriage in the church. Note that remarriage in the church requires the permission of a bishop. One area of concern is that if there are children from a former marriage, the divorced person seeking remarriage must show that he or she is making proper provision for the child or children. The responsibility of being a parent does not end when a marriage ends. Children are vulnerable because they need to be provided for. Holy scripture teaches us that God cares deeply about our responsibility to care for the vulnerable and needy.

In the history of the Christian Church divorce has often been very strictly condemned. But to a woman who had been married five times and was living with a man who was not her husband Jesus offered "living water," the water that becomes "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." "There's a wideness in God's mercy" indeed. For that mercy, may we all be truly thankful. In Jesus' name. Amen.