

Sermon for Sunday, October 17, 1982 by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper, Senior Pastor  
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"WILL GOD DIVORCE HIS WIFE?"

II Corinthians 11:1-6

Text: "I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to  
Christ to present you as a pure bride of her one husband."

II Corinthians 11:2

In the Bible, the relationship of God and of Jesus to the church is described in a variety of ways. For example, in one place St. Paul calls the church the new humanity. What he means by that is that when Jesus comes, he is a sort of new Adam. Those who believe in him become a new kind of humanity. In other places, the church is called the body of Christ, or it is called the flock of God. In other places the church is called the family or household of God. For example, the Greek word for household is oikoumene from which we get the English word, "ecumenical."

However, the image used most frequently to describe the church in the Bible is the concept of a wife. More than any other concept, the Bible takes the idea of husband and wife and applies that to God and the church. For example, one of the most vivid books of the Old Testament is that of Hosea. According to this book of the Bible, a prophet named Hosea is told to go and marry a prostitute. He is to love that prostitute as a wife, and he is to cherish her. But his wife, Gomer, is not content with this love and goes off to practice again her life of prostitution. But what is Hosea to do? God tells him that he is to keep on loving her, that he is to go find her and bring her home again. And what is this story all about? Well, it is a parable, for Gomer represents the church. God's people are like a wife who has been redeemed from a dreadful existence, but whose heart still lives in the gutters of life. The church is like a wife who keeps going back to her old ways of her old sins. Yet God is like Hosea who loves her, who keeps on forgiving her, and who keeps on going back to reclaim her from her evil ways.

Well, the picture of Gomer is a pretty good picture of the church today. The church is always running off from God. The church is always involving herself in the things that sometimes are contrary to God's will for her. The church is always prostituting herself to things that are not pleasing to God. Yet, the fact is, God never divorces his wife. No matter how awful the church is, no matter how much she prostitutes herself, God never rejects her, and God never divorces her.

Do you believe in divorce? Well, the Bible is very much against divorce. Some Bible-believing people try to make divorce one of the unforgivable sins. Well, I don't accept that and while God is against divorce and while he is for the family, I don't believe God is unforgiving when it comes to divorce. But the point is this: God does hate divorce. And at no point in the Bible does the Bible indicate that God gives up on an unfaithful wife and divorces her. For example, in our Scripture this morning, St. Paul writes to the church at Corinth and he says this: "I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband." Well, that is wonderful! St. Paul wants the church

at Corinth to be a pure bride for husband Jesus. But unfortunately that wasn't the kind of wife Corinth was. Paul says she has been led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. Let me tell you, that was putting it mildly! Corinth had so many problems you wouldn't believe it! They were guilty of incest--of abusing the Lord's Supper--of lawsuits against one another--of sexual immorality--of dishonesty and a lot of other things.

But Paul never gave up on the Christians at Corinth because he knew God never gave up on them. You know, I praise God for that! Here at Central we have a lot of sin in our fellowship. There is a lot of brokenness in our lives both individually and corporately. Yet, I praise God that he never gives up on us, he never casts us off, he never divorces us because we are not perfect.

Yes, Jesus loves his bride, the church. In Ephesians, St. Paul tells us that Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. But the thing I want to stress is this: Whatever happens, no matter how unfaithful, no matter how rebellious and no matter how disobedient the church is, nowhere in Scripture are we given any indication that God will divorce the church, that God will separate himself from his bride. In just a few months, our denomination will be voting on whether or not we should unite with the United Presbyterian Church. As your pastor and as the shepherd of this little flock of God, it is my duty and indeed, my responsibility to give you leadership in this matter.

The first thing I want to say is this: the unity of the body of Christ is God's will for his church. When we read the 12th chapter of I Corinthians, St. Paul tells us that each part of the body needs all the other parts. As Paul writes, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ". (I Cor. 12:12) And then he goes on to say that the eye can't say to the hand that it has no need of it, nor that the head has no need of the feet. And Paul goes on to add that all of us together are the body of Christ. Well, that is clear enough. We all need one another. We may not all be alike as the foot is not like the eye nor the ear like the hand, but we all together are the body of Christ.

Yes, the unity of the body of Christ is God's will for his church. Isn't that the prayer of Jesus? As he neared the end of his ministry, he prayed for his church and this is what he said: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.."(John 17:20,21)

Now, there may be those who for whatever reason feel that we should not unite with the United Presbyterians. But the question we must ask ourselves is this: Is there any reason great enough to lead us against the desire of Jesus that we all be one? It is true that there is much sin and failure and unbelief and shortcoming in the United Presbyterian Church, just as there is in our own denomination. But is there anything so great that Jesus would be opposed to our union? Is there anything so vile, so despicable, so unworthy about the United Presbyterians that we would go against the will of Jesus if we unite with them? That hardly seems possible.

So the first thing we need to remember about the church is that the desire of Jesus is for the unity of his bride. The second thing I want to share with you is this: God will never divorce his wife. God is against divorce and as the church is his bride, he will never cast her aside, he will never abandon her or reject her or divorce her. Wasn't that the whole point of the book of Hosea? No matter how wicked Gomer was, no matter what evil thing she did, no matter how much she rejected Hosea, he still loved her, he never gave up on her, and he always went into the market place of sin to buy her back and redeem her.

You know, it is fine to criticize the church. Sometimes she deserves our severest criticism. It is alright to correct the church. Sometimes she needs to be corrected. But it is never alright to abandon the church and give up on the church and run away from the church. Why? Because God never does that. There are some, perhaps even in this congregation, who would tell us to give up on God's wife, to forget her and go find another bride. I don't know about you, but I can't do that. More than anyone in this congregation and more than most in our entire denomination I have poured out my life in an effort to renew and restore and redeem the church of which we are a part.

I haven't been very successful. Those who have worked beside me have not been very successful. But was Hosea successful with Gomer? We don't serve the Lord because we achieve our own goals. We don't serve the church because it becomes what we think it ought to be. No, we serve her because that's what God calls us to do. He doesn't require us to be successful, he just requires that we be faithful. And until God divorces Gomer and casts her aside, we can't either. Until God gives up on the church and tells us to leave her we dare not.

And that brings me to the third thing I want to say this morning. If the husband doesn't divorce the wife, what right have the children to run away from home? To divide or rend the family of God is a terrible thing. For Christians to separate themselves from one another is an awful event. To participate in such a division would be a dreadful thing and if it is done it must be done with such an overwhelming reason, with such an incredible cause, that there would be no doubt that it was God's will.

Is that true in your family? What would justify your breaking up your family? Your wife is not perfect. She burns the toast--she looks awful when you leave for work, the house is messy--your wife isn't perfect. And you aren't either. You ladies know that--he won't take out the garbage--he throws his socks on the floor--he won't keep the yard mowed. There are a lot of failures in your family and mine. What grounds would be sufficient for you to leave your loved ones and go away from home, and declare that you were no longer a part of that family? It would take some incredible reason, would it not?

Well, the same is true for the church. We can get so wrapped up in our little causes and our little reasons that we miss the over-arching love of God for his children, for his family, and for his wayward wife whom he keeps on loving, keeps on redeeming.

Does that make sense to you? No matter what problems your family has, no matter what sins it might commit, no matter what failings it might have, you would not break up that family lightly. So with God. If we break up his family it must be for over-riding reasons, for incredible sins. You see, God will not divorce his wife, and the children shouldn't abandon her either.

Suppose you were out in the middle of a great desert. You have been lost for days. Your canteen is empty. As you have trudged across the burning sands, it is all you can do to place one foot in front of the other. The sun has been merciless. All day it has bourn down upon you, soaking up your body liquids until the pores of your skin no longer have moisture to surrender. Your tongue has grown thick and your mouth, filled with cotton, seems stuck together with an awful dryness. Your lips are dried and cracked from the heat and there is no hope for you in this barren waste. Unable to go any further, you fall on your face in the burning sand. But suddenly there is someone beside you. It is a common woman of the streets, a prostitute. She lifts up your head and places a canteen to your lips. It is filthy and greasy and the water is not clean. But that cooling, refreshing liquid brings life to your dying body. Would you--dying--insist on a morally pure person before you drank? Would you insist on a chalice of silver before you drank? No--you would be grateful for the water. So it is that Jesus who is the living water comes to us through the church--impure, dirty, unfaithful though she be. But to a world who is dying of thirst--God's wife--the church--offers water. The person who brings it and the container she carries may not be all we would desire. But for a dying world, she has the only water there is.