



The 2010-2011 Word & World Lecture

Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce

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As a child of the '70s, I came of age in an era of widespread divorce, and like many of that era, my family was not untouched by the experience. I would have spoken confidently of this as a child, rattling off my family composition in a way that impressed people, making them say, "Oh, well, she's fine. She's one of the children of divorce who is doing okay. We don't need to worry about her." Nevertheless, during my MDiv studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School I began to wonder how divorce might shape the inner life of a person, particularly perhaps their moral and spiritual experience. I looked for resources on this topic and discovered that there wasn't much there. There was a lot on the social and economic impact of divorce on children, which is obviously very important. There's some good work on the psychological impact on children, primarily led by the pioneer scholar of this topic, Judith Wallerstein. But there was nothing that examined in a systematic way my own questions about how divorce shapes the moral development or spiritual journey of young people. Even basic material was lacking, like whether these people are more or less religious and whether they show up at church.

In my divinity school class of fifteen or sixteen, I believe I was the only one

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who came from a divorced family. You often hear that half of all marriages end in divorce, yet I did not see the result of this in the students around me in an MDiv program. So what did this mean? What is the spiritual impact on children of divorce? I was a student of Don Browning, and it was in courses with him that I began to engage these questions. An inquiry that began as a senior ministry project became eventually a Lilly Endowment-funded project and then my book on this subject.¹

THE IMPACT OF DIVORCE

Each year in the United States, approximately one million children experience the divorce of their parents. Today, about one-quarter of young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five are from divorced families. We are not even talking here about the increasing number of children who grow up in single-parent families, but just those impacted by divorce: about one-quarter of young adults today. Clearly, this will affect young adult ministries in particular, but also congregations more broadly. Yet despite the commonness of divorce, there has been very little investigation into the moral and spiritual impact of divorce on children. Too often churches miss opportunities to minister to these young people, both as children and as they get older. But even worse, I think, when churches lack understanding about these young people's experiences, it can evoke pain and suffering among them, because, even in church, they don't hear their stories told or don't feel understood. This means that worship can actually be a painful experience. Churches are called to minister to the experience of children of divorce, because they are called to the most vulnerable, especially children. Further, it is in the interest of the church that wishes to grow to pay attention to this phenomenon—one that impacts not just a few people at the margins, but one that occurs in the very heart of our congregations. One thing I learned is that the children of divorce appear overall to be less religious when they grow up. We need to understand why this is so.

NEW ROLES FOR CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

In my book, I take on the idea of the so-called “good divorce.” The term was first coined by psychology professor Constance Ahrons in her book with that name.² Ahrons argues that it is not so much divorce itself that harms children, but rather the *way* the parents divorce. If we can teach divorcing parents how to divorce better, she maintains, then we will have fewer suffering children of divorce. As long as divorced parents stay involved in their child's life and don't fight with each other, then the child will be fine. Divorce will have little impact.

My response is that even in a “good divorce”—where the parents stay in-

¹Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (New York: Crown, 2005). Refer to the book for references and details relating to the study and the information in this lecture.

²Constance Ahrons, *The Good Divorce* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

volved in the child's life and do not fight with each other—the child is forced to take on a dramatically new and different job. It now becomes the child's task to make sense of the parents' two worlds, their different ways of living, their different sets of beliefs, their habits. The child has to do this even when it is no longer the job of the parents. One of the big challenges in marriage is bringing together the two worlds from which the husband and wife come. People come to a marriage as two individuals with two different histories, traditions, backgrounds, sets of relationships, dreams, and desires; they are male and female, and they are different in many other ways. It's hard work to rub together the sharp edges of these two worlds. It often produces conflict, so one of the tasks in being married is to figure out not so much how to make the conflict go away, because conflict is inevitable in any human community, but how to handle conflict well and responsibly so that people don't get hurt, so that people are respected.

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When couples who have children divorce, that job of making sense of the differences does not go away. But it is no longer the parents' job. True, parents still have to negotiate school issues, whose health insurance will cover the kids, and who is going to pick up Johnny at soccer camp next week. But as to the deep things about core identity—who you are, what you believe, whether you believe in God, and, if so, what you do about it; the big questions of moral and spiritual identity—it is no longer the parents' job to rub these together with that other person who is now the ex-wife or ex-husband. In fact, people get divorced in part so they don't have to do that anymore. But the job has not gone away; it has become the child's task instead. The child is growing up traveling between the parental worlds, and he or she will have to make sense of those different beliefs and values and ways of living. As children seek to forge their own identities, to figure out who they are and what they believe, the conflicted world of the parents has migrated to the inner life of the child.

HEARING CHILDREN'S VOICES

This is also, I think, a quite lonely conflict, because it hasn't been named. So many of us who grew up in divorced families walked around thinking that we were "weird" for some reason, but we now recognize that others share our experiences and feelings, and many of us are starting to tell our stories. Younger children don't have voices. They make a lot of noise, but they don't have voices in the public sphere. It's only when they get older that they can start telling their story. And even then it's difficult, because we don't want to hurt our parents. We don't want to

sound like complainers or victims, we want to respect our parents' privacy, but we also have a story of our own to tell. That story sometimes does implicate our parents, and that can be a very difficult terrain to walk.

One of the things we discovered in our study is that young adults from divorced families were less likely to be religious when they grew up—less likely to say in our survey that they were “very” or “fairly” religious. They were less likely to be a member of a house of worship. They were less likely to hold a leadership position there. There are, of course, exceptions. Some become more religious as a result of their parents' divorce, but more do not.

In our survey of eighteen- to thirty-five-year olds, one question we asked was this: “Of those who were active in a church at the time of their parents' divorce, did anyone from the clergy or congregation reach out to you at that time?” Two-thirds of the respondents said no—even at that most clear and obvious point of distress in their families, no one reached out to them. One-quarter said that someone did reach out, and the others either didn't know or were too young to remember. But two-thirds do not recall anyone reaching out to them even at that time, even when they were showing up at church and their family was obviously in distress.

But the problem goes deeper than that. The issue is not merely ministry to minor children of divorce, but also to people now grown up who are the product of parental divorce. Divorce continues to impact children and young people through childhood, adolescence, leaving home, young adulthood, forming their own marriages, having their own children, and even into the caretaking of their aging parents. So ministry to the children of divorce is not just something that happens in Sunday School or in the youth group, or even something that happens with young people in premarital education. Rather, we are talking about a life-course perspective that impacts the whole person and the whole congregation.

STORIES OF FAITH FOR CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

This affects even how we tell the stories of the faith. For example, when I asked young people to reflect on the parable of the Prodigal Son, those from intact families often responded to the parable with stories of their own acting out as young people, sometimes in profound and disturbing ways; but, they said, “When we came back home, our parents welcomed us despite our mistakes. That story makes sense to me.” Those from divorced families would often focus not on the homecoming, but on the beginning of the story where the son leaves home. It was that departure of a family member that got their attention. For them, of course, it wasn't about the child leaving home; instead the story evoked memories of when their dad or mom left home and initiated the divorce in the first place, or the daily comings and goings of their busy divorced parents, always in and out of their lives. For them it was a parable about their prodigal parents, not the prodigal son. If something like this is going on in the minds and hearts of young people sitting in the congregation listening to the preacher, the usual sermon on this text—the one

that reminds people of God the loving father waiting in the doorway for us to return—will not necessarily connect with them. They see, instead, themselves in the role of the one waiting in the doorway for the dad or mom to come home. Things don't connect.

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Another example: I asked these young people from divorced families to reflect on the commandment to honor your father and mother. The children of divorce would get stuck. First of all, the commandment implies their parents were a unit, which theirs were not. It was very easy for them to honor a parent who stuck with them through thick and thin and sacrificed a lot for them—maybe a single mom or sometimes a single dad. Honoring that parent was no problem, but how do you honor the parent who left you? What does that mean? What does that mean as you get older and you're not so needy and vulnerable anymore? Or when the parents become the vulnerable ones? How do you make sense of all that? The image of God as a father, where a father is supposed to evoke that ever-present person who's there for you, protecting you, supporting and providing for you, is an increasingly unfamiliar experience for a lot of young people today. So if we want to speak of God as father, we will have to do some theological work to have that make sense. God might become the father you never had in real life. God might become your spiritual father who never fails like your earthly father did. For some, God might be the father whose goodness is hinted at by wonderful experiences with an earthly father, but we can't assume that young people today are having those daily intimate, connective experiences with father or with mother.

ISSUES OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

I also looked at how young people from two worlds make sense of who they are. Who am I? Where do I belong? What is true? Is there a God? What is right and wrong? The grown children of divorce often told me that in growing up they felt like they had to be a different person in each parent's world. They felt like they had their mom self and their dad self. These didn't come together too often. One of the crazy things about being a child of divorce is that you and maybe your full siblings are the only link between these two people who increasingly have relationships with people who may not even know each other or have never met. In my case, I was raised with my half-brother—same mom, different dads. My father is not his father. My father and my brother have probably been in the same room together only a half dozen times in my life. So I care deeply for both of them, yet they don't know each other. That inner division is always there.

When I asked these young people, "How did you feel growing up when your divorced parents were in the same room together?" They said, "Oh, god, it made

me crazy. I didn't know who to be. I had my mom self and I had my dad self and here you'd be in the same room together and it was a source of great tension and confusion." It certainly wasn't like the happy-go-lucky experience that we think it should be when mom and dad are finally back together again.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

In some churches today, there have been proposals for divorce liturgies to ritualize divorce the way we ritualize marriage. The argument is that because divorce is happening so much, we should meet together under the cross to give back rings and to make new promises, at least to keep taking care of the children even if we no longer want to be married to each other. This is, I think, a horrible idea, because we simply do not know enough about this experience to start writing liturgies about it. It could definitely do more harm than good to have people who don't know what they're doing using the language of Scripture to ritualize a divorce, while a ten-year-old child is standing there trying to make sense of it all.

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People are trying to make a difference, but I think that they could do more and make a bigger difference by better understanding where the children of divorce are coming from and by better understanding what marriage is. We might, for example, help prevent divorce in the first place by helping the married people in our congregations with their marriages, or by supporting those young people who are getting married. Might we, for example, covenant to help support the young children of married couples in our congregations? It's hard work to have a five-year-old or three-year-old or a one-year-old. If we could help those families who are in stress and crisis and are not yet to the point of divorce before they get there, we would be doing a good work.

We also need to work to raise the next generation to understand what marriage is and why children need their fathers and their mothers, to know that marriage is this amazing, thick thing and that the church is a special and primary custodian of it. Marriage has many flaws, but it remains the best institution society has come up with so far to protect children with the love and care of their mother and father—the two people most likely to invest in them. We need to find the people in crisis and help them think about what marriage really is and what families need; we need to do a better job of walking with them and ministering to those families before they reach the point of divorce.

Certainly, we need also to welcome divorced people into the full life of the congregation. This is not easy, because we are often too eager to point out the brokenness in others without recognizing that we all fall short in many ways every

day. But unexpected things can happen if we are willing to preach, teach, and lead in this area.

The churches are called to minister to the vulnerable and the voiceless, especially children. We are called to be humble but also prophetic. Today divorce and other forms of family fragmentation deeply shape the experiences children and young people have in their families of origin and the ways they approach the stories of the faith. For the sake of these young people, for our congregations, and for the world, we need to be attentive to the important role families and family change play in the moral development and spiritual journeys of so many young people today. ⊕

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