

## *Lectio Divina* and Divorce: Reflections in Twelve Parts about What Divorce Has to Teach the Church

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### I

First, let me say what this essay is not:

It is not an argument about whether “the Church” or churches should allow divorce.

It is not a painstaking consideration of what Jesus had to say about divorce, and, given those words, the circumstances in which it might or might not be legitimate to divorce.

It is not an essay about whether remarriage should be permitted after divorce.

It is not a reading of the social scientific literature—reams, of it, now; whole libraries of literature—on the effects of divorce on children.<sup>1</sup>

It is not a claim about what divorce reveals about “the culture”—for example, that the United States is in peril because people’s selfish desire for fulfillment has eroded a *gemeinschaftliche* commitment to the common good.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay does not consider the implications of divorce for children, and as such, there is a certain decided limitation to the essay. For an astute reading of divorce specifically as it pertains to marriages with children, see Julie Hanlon Rubio’s predictably brilliant “Three-in-One Flesh: A Christian Reappraisal of Divorce in Light of Recent Studies,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 23, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2003): 47–70.

This essay, instead, suggests that divorce can help the church remember certain things about the Christian story. This essay asks: What is the witness of divorcing and divorced people in the church to the church?

To take up that question is to push Christian discussions of divorce in at least two ways. First, it is to push those who fear that any discussion of the theological and pastoral witness of divorce is perform an accommodation of a grievous trend, and therefore to be avoided. Second, it is to push those (mostly pastors) who are worried not about accommodation but about alienation, and who are so keen to welcome and receive divorced people into their church communities that they say little to nothing about divorce at all. That impulse—to avoid hurting people—is laudable, but when it creates wells of silence around divorce, divorced or divorcing people are left with no tools to reflect theologically on their own divorces, and the church community is left with little sense of how it might receive the divorced person as a witness. To those who fear accommodation, and to those who fear alienation, this essay wants to ask: What might divorce help the church remember? What true things might divorce help the church see?

Many ethicists, theologians, and pastors have written about what marriage and singleness teach the church. Marriage images reconciliation for the church. Marriage offers the church a picture of forgiveness and faithfulness. Marriage gives the church a glimpse of our eschatological union with Christ, a reminder that the heavenly banquet is not just any meal—it is a wedding feast. Singleness, in turn, offers a focused picture of the “vacancy for God” that all Christians are to cultivate. Singleness witnesses to another eschatological verity, as important for the church’s imagination as that wedding banquet: in heaven there will be no marriage or giving in marriage. Both marriage and singleness are gifts God has given to the church. They are stations of life God has created for the enrichment and sanctification of not only those individual people who are married or single; God has given marriage and singleness *to* the whole church, for the enrichment and sanctification *of* the whole church. The church needs both marriage and singleness.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Lauren F. Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2005), 133–148; Henri Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer, and Contemplation* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 43–47. We can also learn here from Eugene Rogers’s discussion of what heterosexual couples in the church have to learn about sexuality from same-sex couples in the

To suggest that divorce can teach the church something is not to argue that divorce is “a good” as such, or a gift created by God in a way that precisely parallels marriage and singleness. It is rather to move away, momentarily, from the category of rationale and read the many divorces in our midst from another place. Instead of focusing on whether and under what circumstances Christians can divorce, and instead of using divorce to launch a critique of society, this essay introduces another question: Divorce is a failure, and a morally serious failure at that; is it a failure that can teach the church anything about penitence, forgiveness, justice, grace, vocation? About love?

## II

Put another way, if we in the church were to practice *lectio divina* with divorce-in-our-midst as the text, what might the Holy Spirit call to our attention?<sup>3</sup>

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church and vice versa, that is, that same-sex couples are reminded by heterosexual couples to find ways for their sexuality to be fruitful and hospitable, and heterosexual couples are reminded by same-sex couples to allow their sexuality to be unitive. See Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Hence the essay's twelve sections; they represent four cycles of *lectio* reflection. In traditional *lectio*, a person reads a biblical text slowly, following a four-part pattern of prayer and reflection as she reads: first, read and notice which word or phrase your attention is drawn to (or, better, which word or phrase the Holy Spirit brings to your attention); second, read and ask what God is offering you in this reading and noticing and attention-drawing; third, read and ask yourself, and God, how you might wish to respond to what is being offered; fourth, read and dwell contemplatively (in the company of the text) with God. Here, sections I, V, and IX represent initial readings (initial soundings) and noticing; sections II, VI, and X represent a meaning that might be on offer in these noticing; sections III, VII, and XI represent a possible response; and sections IV, VIII, and XII represent a dwelling, in the company of the reading. I hazard this format with the recognition that it may be altogether too much—too precious, perhaps—but with a deep conviction that a *lectio*-like noticing may precisely be the kind of attention that divorce-in-the-church's-midst warrants, and a deep conviction that familiar and tired ecclesial conversations may be reframed in surprising (sometimes unsettling) ways when they emerge from prayer or contemplation. The theory is not that prayer is a utilitarian device best used for the reshaping of ecclesial conversations, but that a habit of engaging the Scriptures through *lectio* eventually overflows the Scriptures, and fosters a way of engaging other “texts” in the church.

## III

Sometimes, after hard discernment, divorce seems to be the action most likely to prompt human flourishing. What kind of moral datum is human flourishing? How does one square a commitment to Scripture and tradition with an individual man or woman's discernment that an action that seems contrary to God's word, in Scripture and tradition, appears to be required for human flourishing? (And whose flourishing? Given that divorce can involve conflicted flourishing—one spouse seeking to flourish in a way that is destructive for the other, or both spouses' flourishing, but possibly at cost to their children—how does one adjudicate among and between different people's flourishing?)

In pop Christian literature on marriage, we often read that love is not a feeling; it is a way of acting toward someone: "*Love is not a feeling*. It is a commitment to work for the good of your mate whether you feel like it or not"<sup>4</sup>; "Love is not a feeling, it's a choice, a commitment."<sup>5</sup> This is fine as far as it goes; the problem is that it does not go very far. By the measure of this popular literature, those who divorce are either silly and superficial ingénues who mistakenly think love is a feeling, and who flee when the feeling fades; or they are callow and feckless, refusing to do something apparently doable, something apparently simple and straightforward—that is, they have failed to keep behaving lovingly toward someone for whom they no longer feel much warmth.

But perhaps those who write about the simple act of willing one's self to act lovingly toward a person from whom one has become estranged—perhaps those writers evince an inadequate appreciation of sin.

My own divorce challenged everything I thought I knew about reading the Bible and thinking theologically. I came to think that many well-meaning Christian words about divorce—commonplaces about individualism, commonplaces about all marriages having their rough seasons—were not adequate to the task. I was a person who believed human experience to be a fairly limited datum; I believed that human experience was marked by the fall and needed to be refined by the

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory K. Popcak, *For Better . . . Forever!: A Catholic Guide to Lifelong Marriage* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 1999), 114.

<sup>5</sup> Emerson Eggerichs, *Love and Respect: The Love She Most Desires, The Respect He Desperately Needs* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 98.

words of Scripture and the words of Christian community. I believe that still. During my marriage, however, I came to think that one's own emotions or experience had to be some kind of theological datum, too. To be sure, experience (or perception, or feeling) cannot overtake the words of Scripture, the history of Christian tradition, and the voice of one's immediate community. But in the effort to denounce the "individualism" that ostensibly undergirds today's divorce rate, some Christian conversations about divorce elide the ways that experience, or self-knowledge, has long been part of Christian discernment.

Self-knowledge is not identical with individualism. One can be self-aware and self-attentive in relationship; one can practice a self-attentiveness that aims to contribute to the greater good and to promote the welfare of others. The self-knowledge that has historically played a part in Christian discernment is not knowledge-of-self that is imagined to be outside of encounter with God. As Catherine of Siena wrote (echoing the tradition of the desert fathers), dwelling in "the cell of self-knowledge" is necessary for the apprehension of "God's goodness toward [us], since knowledge follows love." This self-knowledge is not separate from God. To the contrary, "when self-knowledge is rooted in the depths of divine love, one can face one's limitations and admit to complicity in sin."<sup>6</sup>

This is the kind of self-knowledge, the kind of individual reflection on experience that may faithfully be part of Christian conversations about divorce.

Divorce reminds the church that in God's love, we can name our own limitations.

#### IV

Then again, what if love is partly a feeling? Neuroscience is teaching us about the central role emotions play in decision-making: the recent scientific literature on the subject tells us that emotions are "deeply empirical" and "are a crucial part of the decision-making process." When we "get a feeling" about something, that feeling may in fact be our brain's elegant summary of many different bits of data.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Susan W. Rakoczy, "Transforming the Tradition of Discernment," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 139 (March 2011): 98.

<sup>7</sup> Jonah Lehrer, *How We Decide* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2009): 15–18, 23–26, 41–42, 238–240.

We are just beginning to understand how our body generates emotions, how we create reasons for our actions *ex post facto*, how the orbitofrontal cortex integrates emotions into our decision-making. The new neuroscience will never tell us everything, but it does promise to diagnose as inadequate what we think we know about the dichotomy between love as feeling and love as behavior. Given the apparently critical role of feelings in decision-making, love-as-feeling would be not unimportant for the crafting of ethics.

## V

Margaret Farley's essay "Marriage, Divorce, and Personal Commitments" remains one of the church's the most pastorally thoughtful considerations of a Christian ethics of divorce. Farley names clearly the power of marriage: "Marriage . . . with permanence as one of its essential elements, is what God wants and what we want and need—whether for ourselves or for others." And yet, as Farley notes, "it does not [always] seem to work. The promises we make do not always hold." Indeed, observes Farley, we make promises, decorating them with signatures and gifts and surrounding them with witnesses precisely because our commitments are fragile. We hope the signatures and gifts will reinforce the commitments. On Farley's account, the failures of these promises do not signal a cultural crisis of individualism and selfishness. Rather, says Farley, the failures of our nuptial promises signal "real incapacities—not all of our own making, but part of our share in the 'human condition.'"<sup>8</sup>

Divorce reminds the church about frailty.

There are times, writes Farley, when an "extremely serious, nearly unconditional, permanent commitment may cease to bind. . . . The point of a permanent commitment, of course, is to bind those who make it, in spite of any changes that may come. But can it always hold? Can it hold absolutely, in the face of radical and unexpected change? My answer: sometimes it cannot. Sometimes the obligation must be released."<sup>9</sup>

Farley enumerates three circumstances in which the obligation may need to be released: first, if it becomes impossible to sustain the

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<sup>8</sup> Margaret A. Farley, "Marriage, Divorce, and Personal Commitments," in Adrian Thatcher, ed., *Celebrating Christian Marriage* (New York: T&T Clark, 2001), 359.

<sup>9</sup> Farley, "Marriage, Divorce and Personal Commitments," 366.

commitment; second, if a “marriage commitment has . . . completely lost its purpose . . . its intrinsic meaning”; third, if a conflicting obligation takes priority over a marital commitment.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, there is a certain (scary?) subjectivity in these criteria, especially the first. Farley’s first criterion—the impossibility of sustaining the commitment—is frightening because human beings have a great capacity for self-serving self-deception. And Farley’s first criterion is frightening because most of us live in communities too “thin” to help us discern impossibility (and most of us live in communities that do not have the authority to enforce such a judgment, even should a judgment be reached). Thus, the category of impossibility seems slippery.

Yet “impossibility” is precisely the index of divorce’s capacity to witness to us about our own infirmity. Asking the person whose marriage has become impossible simply to stick with the marriage is like asking a depressed person to be more cheerful. What from the outside may look quite possible—if only she were willing to work harder, if only he were willing to set aside his selfish desires—is, in fact, not possible. That it *seems like it should be possible* for the married person to work harder may be the point. As Vigen Guroian has written in his discussion of the two penitential prayers that feature in the Orthodox Order of Second Marriage, “failed marriages and second marriages are a lesson to all persons married or ‘familiar’ ‘in the Lord’ about the universal frailty of human nature and the sin which attaches to everyone.”<sup>11</sup>

The church is ambivalent about divorce in part because we do not trust people (and perhaps especially we do not trust women) to discern things for themselves. The category of “impossibility” is unnerving because we do not trust people to discern what is possible and what is not. Especially given the relatively thin communities in which most of us live (but even, I think, if we thickened those communities, and found them more robust and reliable), we must sometimes trust individual men and individual women to determine what is and is not possible. If you tell me your marriage is impossible, I may, if I am your priest or spiritual director or close friend, probe; I may ask questions; I may, once or twice, tell you what I see. But finally

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<sup>10</sup> Farley, “Marriage, Divorce, and Personal Commitments,” 367–371.

<sup>11</sup> Vigen Guroian, *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 99.

I have to trust your ability to discern, and I have to trust God to hold you in your discernment.

One of the reasons we do not trust people to discern for themselves is that we, the church, have not done a good job of forming the members of the community.

## VI

I once was invited to a divorce party.

I had never heard of divorce parties: I hadn't thrown one for myself when I divorced a few years back, and I certainly hadn't realized this was a trend. (There's even a novel called *The Divorce Party*, in which a young woman's first introduction to her future parents-in-law comes at the elder couple's divorce bash.)

To get up to speed, I turned to Google. I did not like what I saw: professional party planners specializing in divorce galas; directions for a game that culminates in tearing one's marriage license to shreds; cakes on which a parodic groomish figure gives the boot to a caricatured brideish figure. The cakes emblazoned with the words *Free at Last* seemed to me not only a mocking of wedding cakes, but a gross misuse of African-American hymnody, that misuse especially pointed because of the tangled history of slavery, freedom, and marriage. (Enslaved African-Americans often entered into informal marriages, and those marriages were sometimes forcibly ended when one of the spouses was sold and taken many hundreds of miles away. In addition to the inevitable grief such a separation would cause, the marital status of the man and woman thus separated was suddenly in question. One Virginia presbytery, whose members include white and black Virginians, determined that in such cases the slave remaining in Virginia could act "as if the other was dead" and take "another Companion" without jeopardizing his or her standing in the church.<sup>12</sup>) One of the first things newly free African-Americans did after Emancipation was get married.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas E. Buckley, *The Great Catastrophe of My Life: Divorce in the Old Dominion* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 67.

<sup>13</sup> On newly emancipated African-Americans' embrace of marriage, see Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15; and Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 84.



Online, I found that a writer for the *Daily Mail* had offered an astute critique of divorce parties. The writer, aptly named Virginia Ironside, recalled her own divorce, some three decades ago:

I remember nothing but the ghastly conflicting emotions. My husband moved out—or did I send him away?—and I recall weeping over our incapacity to stay together for the sake of our small son. One minute I'd feel so full of guilt and self-hatred that I'd be tempted to ask him to come round and take over while I rushed off to Dover to hurl myself off a cliff; and then, the following day, feeling that all I wanted to do was to hire a hit man and eliminate him from the face of the earth. . . . Could the gift of a toaster from a friend have helped heal my wounds? Would a party have done the trick? I doubt it very much. Indeed, I think it would only have made matters worse.

Ironside also asked if “these divorce parties ever consider the children,” who presumably would be less than thrilled at the thought of Mom toasting her liberation from Dad.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the divorce party I attended was atypical, but my preliminary naysaying was misplaced. I did not see, at this party, silly or cruel hilarity about a tragic event. I did not see women duped by a savvy marketing machine, emotions preyed on by the imperative to buy sarcastic paper plates and cake toppers. What I saw at this divorce party was, actually, the church. I saw a woman who had left what she had understood to be her family. It was a leave-taking she did with utmost seriousness, and with pastoral counsel. Thankfully, we did not play any embarrassing pretend-this-is-an-inverted-wedding-shower games. It was just a regular party, with regular hummus and carrots and regular white wine, and about an hour in, the hostess—whom I'll call Karen—stood up and spoke for about two minutes. Karen said that this gathering was a celebration of her having gotten through a very hard year, and a way of thanking all the people who had accompanied her through that hard time.

Her words were moving and appropriate. The party was not raucous; there was a note of sobriety—not wholly unlike the note of

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<sup>14</sup> Virginia Ironside, “Why Having a Divorce Party is Like Celebrating a Miscarriage,” *Daily Mail*, January 28, 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1244307/Why-having-divorce-party-like-celebrating-miscarriage.html#ixzz1tsBeAGZa>.

sobriety injected into Orthodox second-wedding rites by those penitential prayers. Apt sobriety.

This gathering at Karen's house was not a formal rite of the church, but gathered in Karen's living room was the piece of the church that had walked with Karen as she walked away from her marriage. At this party, a piece of the church welcomed Karen onto stable ground.

Karen's divorce party was attended by a pretty pointy-headed group, and I got into conversation with a graduate student—who, like me and like Karen, was divorced. We talked about how odd it is that many of our churches have no way of formally recognizing the end of a marriage. We want the church to be involved at the beginning of a marriage, but then we leave the dissolving of marriages that fail to the state. We talked about how some people have mocked the efforts of a handful of Protestants to formulate rituals for divorce.<sup>15</sup>

"Some day," said my interlocutor, "an enterprising graduate student will write a dissertation about divorce parties. She will analyze them through the lens of ritual theory. She will argue that this is the piety of laypeople, crafting a ritual to meet their needs when there is no official church ritual, and she will note that laypeople have long formulated extra-ecclesial rituals to fill in church crevices."

Then we were interrupted by another woman, wanting to know our thoughts about the upcoming gubernatorial primary.

Karen's divorce party did meet a certain kind of need. Using Catherine Bell, our hypothetical future graduate student might argue that this divorce party negotiated a "repertoire" of existing ritual while also concocting anew a symbolically appropriate response to a specific social reality in a specific time and place.<sup>16</sup>

Later, on my way home, I would think that the church does, in fact, have a ritual for divorce. It is called, variously, confession; the sacrament of penance; the rite for the reconciliation of a penitent.

Marriage reminds the church about forgiveness.

Divorce reminds the church about forgiveness.

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 348–349.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), chapter 6.

## VII

Those marriages that have run totally off the rails and then come back together again, revived—those marriages teach the church about resurrection.

So does the fact that three months after your divorce, or six months after, or two years after, or five, you got out of bed in the morning—and were no longer a mess of splintered shards and brokenness, but were whole, or moving toward whole; not back to how you were before, but different, closer to the person God is calling you to be. You who thought you would never again be anything other than shattered and miserable. You are the person through whom divorce teaches the church about resurrection.

## VIII

The obligation to love one another does not begin at marriage. It begins somewhere prior: it begins whenever we read Leviticus 19. It begins in baptism, when the baptizand promises, with God's help, to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself."<sup>17</sup>

Nor does the obligation to love end when one ends a marriage—not because the marital vows to love and cherish are, after dissolution, per se still operative, but because the Great Commandment is still operative. Perhaps the problem is not that the church has accepted divorce, but that we have accepted unloving behavior between divorced people (especially those people who are not co-parenting children).

Jesus tells us to love our enemies. I hear those words proclaimed in my well-appointed Episcopal church, and I think that most of us gathered here on this Sunday morning don't really have enemies. But it is common to gloss one's ex as an enemy (to wit Erica Jong's observation that in divorce "your partner and best friend becomes your enemy"<sup>18</sup>) and, indeed, when one is involved in battles over custody and money, one's ex-spouse may truly be an enemy (to wit the

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<sup>17</sup> This phrase is drawn from the Baptismal Covenant in *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1979), 305.

<sup>18</sup> Erica Jong, *Fear of Fifty: A Midlife Memoir* (New York: Tarcher, 2006), 184.

language of “battle”). The divorced people in the pews may come as close as anyone in your congregation to having an actual enemy.

I do not know what it means to love my ex-husband, but I know I am commanded to do it. I know that divorce does not create an exception to Matthew 5:44, although we in the church sometimes act like it does. If I were to figure out how to love my ex-husband, then maybe my divorce would have something to teach my church about learning to love your enemy.

## IX

“We are all pilgrims, faltering toward divorce,” says the narrator of John Updike’s short story “The Music School.”<sup>19</sup> Scholars have read this epigram as a claim about national identity. “The word ‘pilgrims’ is of course associated with the founding of American culture,” writes literary critic Kimberly A. Freeman. “Thus in making his pilgrims of the American 1960s falter toward divorce, Updike both invokes their Americanness and links that Americanness with divorce.”<sup>20</sup> But the “Americanness” of the term “pilgrim” is an overtone. The bass note of the chord is a centuries-old act of Christian discipleship: the pilgrimages undertaken in the church, in penance and piety and the pursuit of enlightenment, since antiquity.

To summon John Updike—that most eloquent chronicler of adultery and marital dissolution—for a serious consideration of divorce may seem cheeky. But cheekiness, and Updike’s own irony, notwithstanding, Updike’s naming divorce as a pilgrimage may be illuminating.

Consider the *telos* of the pilgrimage: the beginning of pilgrimage is the recognition that the place toward which we are moving is not our ultimate destination. Divorce is not our ultimate destination, but neither is Campostela or Jerusalem. This simple insight might usefully shape the pastoral care needed during a divorce.

Pilgrimage does not only touch the pilgrim. Like all spiritual practices of the church, pilgrimage is undertaken not only for the benefit of the individual pilgrim, but for the benefit of the larger

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<sup>19</sup> John Updike, *The Music School: Short Stories* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 192.

<sup>20</sup> Kimberly A. Freeman, *Love American Style: Divorce and the American Novel, 1881–1976* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 115.

church.<sup>21</sup> The walk to Compostela or the pilgrimage to Lourdes is undertaken so that the pilgrim might have the opportunity to love the neighbor she meets on the way.<sup>22</sup> The walk is undertaken so that the whole church may participate in “historical enquiry bathed in prayer.”<sup>23</sup> Pilgrims have things to teach the community who sent them out, the community they meet along the way, and the community to whom they may return.

Likewise, divorce, named by Updike as our culture’s pilgrimage, may have something to teach the community. Divorce can teach the community about both fragility and endurance—the fragility of human promises and the endurance of the promises of God.

## X

The church has always been ambivalent about pilgrimage.<sup>24</sup>

## XI

Divorce and subsequent remarriage became legal “for the first time in centuries” in Calvin’s Geneva. What lurked beneath many of these divorces was adultery; on a reading of both Roman law and the Gospel of Matthew, Geneva’s theologians and judges held that adultery legitimated both divorce and remarriage. Sometimes adultery led the municipality simply to dissolve a nuptial union, but theologians, including Calvin himself, pointed to Leviticus 20 and called for the municipality to kill those found guilty of adultery. And so for a brief sclerotic season in the mid-sixteenth century, if you

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<sup>21</sup> See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 190–205.

<sup>22</sup> On loving the neighbor you meet on the way, see Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, “Here I Walk: An Ecumenical Pilgrimage,” *The Christian Century* 128, no. 7 (April 5, 2011): 24–27.

<sup>23</sup> For the formulation “historical enquiry bathed in prayer,” see Peter Walker, “Pilgrimage in the Early Church,” in Craig G. Bartholomew and Fred Hughes, eds., *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 88.

<sup>24</sup> For the ambivalence shot through the Christian tradition about pilgrimage, see Andrew T. Lincoln, “Pilgrimage and the New Testament,” in Bartholomew and Hughes, *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*, 44; and Graham Tomlin, “Protestants and Pilgrimage,” in Bartholomew and Hughes, *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*, 111.

caught your spouse in bed with someone else, you could bring her before the courts, and in “a few days she would be dead, usually from public drowning, and [you] would be free to marry again.”<sup>25</sup> Thus Geneva “created a divorce of a type that had become highly unusual in the Western world, in which a marriage was ended by putting one of the parties . . . to death.”<sup>26</sup>

Unsurprisingly, most of the people put to death for adultery in Calvin’s Geneva were women.<sup>27</sup>

Infidelity was not the only reason people divorced. Imagine that you had become a Protestant, and then you fled from, say, Norwich to Geneva to avoid religious persecution—but your spouse refused to accompany you. Your spouse’s staying put in England constituted “religious desertion,” and in Calvin’s Geneva it too was grounds for divorce.

Ergo the case of a Neapolitan nobleman named Galeazzo Caracciolo. He was wealthy and well-connected and made a marriage to a wealthy and well-connected woman named Vittoria Carrafa. In the 1540s, moved by a series of sermons on First and Second Corinthians, Galeazzo became a convicted Protestant. Protestants had a tough row to hoe in Italy, and in 1551 Galeazzo abandoned his household, his wealth, and his prominence, setting out for Protestant lands, arriving ultimately in Geneva, where, of course, he was received with a king’s welcome; the city even gave him a medal, inscribed with the Psalmist’s proclamation “I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.” For several years, Galeazzo tried to persuade his wife to join him, but Vittoria refused to leave either Italy or the Catholic Church. And so in 1559, drawing on Paul’s argument about marriage between Christians and pagans in 1 Corinthians 7:12–15, Galeazzo began a suit for divorce. He remarried two months after the divorce was granted, and he lived happily ever after with his second wife, a French widow, for almost thirty years. Back in Naples, of course, his family had been undone by the whole ordeal—his children’s careers were ruined, and remarriage was not an option for Vittoria Carrafa, who remained a Catholic. Galeazzo’s divorce allowed him to pursue domestic happiness, but he also

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<sup>25</sup> Robert M. Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 118.

<sup>26</sup> Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva*, 3.

brought “continual pain” and “eventual disaster” to “every member of his first family.” In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one of the staples of Protestant hagiography was a biography of Galeazzo Caracciolo.<sup>28</sup>

So religious conviction became grounds for divorce, and also grounds for polemic: Catholics increasingly charged that men and women feigned Protestant commitments simply because they wanted out of unhappy marriages.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps for some men and women it was not as simple as earnest conviction or cynical pretense. Leaving a marriage requires, among other things, overcoming a staggering load of inertia (also shame, hesitation, doubt, guilt). You craft a story, and you believe the story, and in its way, of course, the story is true: the story may be about your husband’s anger, or it may be about your own endless unhappiness, or it may be about an incident that seemed to you the most egregious betrayal, though to an outsider the same incident might appear to be a mere slight. You craft a story and you cling to the story, and it helps get you out of the marriage and helps you, later, make sense of the divorce. I can imagine that a man or woman inside a marriage that felt intolerable might discover Calvinist proclivities and cleave to them. I can imagine an intolerable marriage being precisely the kind of kiln that reshapes your religious convictions.

Theodore Beza, Calvin’s political and theological heir, codified the new Protestant thinking about divorce in his *Tractatio de repudiis et divortiiis*. Consistent with Genevan precedent, Beza held that there were two biblically authorized grounds for divorce: adultery (Matthew 5 and 19) and desertion (1 Corinthians 7:15). Beza did not brook divorce in circumstances of mere incompatibility, but he expanded beyond religious disagreements the grounds on which one could legitimately claim desertion. “The principal reason for marriage,” he argued, “is cohabitation and sex. [Thus] any person who abandons a spouse . . . destroys the very essence of a marriage,” and the deserted spouse “should be free to marry again.”<sup>30</sup> This was the first code of divorce that can be described as modern.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva*, 143–165.

<sup>29</sup> Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva*, 143, 155–156.

<sup>30</sup> Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva*, 172.

<sup>31</sup> Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva*, 174, 179.

## XII

A pastor once told me that I needed to stay married because keeping my covenantal obligation would be inherently life-giving, and breaking said covenant would be inherently death-dealing. These words kept me in my marriage for a while.

Here are some other words:

She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce; yet her false sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. (Jeremiah 3:8)

Thus says the LORD:

Where is your mother's bill of divorce  
with which I put her away?

Or which of my creditors is it  
to whom I have sold you?

No, because of your sins you were sold,  
and for your transgressions your mother was put away. (Isaiah 50:1)

Over and over, divorce is the prophets' metaphor for ruptured relationship. God sends away the unfaithful spouse, and then there is reconciliation. One way to read this trope is to say that married people are called to reconcile; married people are called to pattern their reconciliation on God's seemingly inexhaustible willingness to reconcile with Israel.

Yet there is a categorical difference between a covenant with God and a covenant between people. Human beings break their covenants. Our desire to absolutize marriage may reflect a confusion of the prophets' metaphor with the reality behind the metaphor (that reality being the relationship with God). We are right to want to sanctify our human relationships—especially our most important relationships, especially those relationships that provide the framework for many families. But to confuse those human covenants with the covenants made by God is, to say the least, a mistake (and it is a mistake that has led, in some marriages, to abuse).

Metaphors work precisely because they underline difference even as they suggest similarities between the unlike things analogized. The prophets recognize divorce as a failure, and their metaphorizing



sets human nuptial failure inside the context of a wider failure. The metaphor recognizes that human marital covenants are located within the larger covenant between God and people, and the metaphor recognizes that God continues to uphold that larger covenant. At the same time, the metaphor, as metaphor, demands that we not turn individual human relationships into metonymy for the whole broken covenant between people and God. The metaphor, as metaphor, instructs us to avoid a conflation between what happens in individual relationships and what happens in the use of divorce as a descriptor of people's (flailing, failing) relationship to God. The prophetic texts locate the marriage covenant within the covenant between God and Israel, but in their very use of metaphor, they recognize a huge distinction: one covenant is constrained by human incapacity, the other is not. Human beings are not God. God will not be broken by remaining in a failing relationship; men and women sometimes will be. And God is capable of things—of reconciliations—that we are not capable of.

We name those things that God alone can generate and that God alone can give “grace.”

Divorce is a chance for the church to learn about how we are different from God.

Divorce is a chance for the church to learn about grace.

