

Culture of Divorce, Culture of Death

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"Come sit over here," my wife whispered to me. "Let's give Dad a chance to be alone with her."

It was a quiet room in a hospice, the only sounds the muffled pumping of oxygen, and the softer and slower breathing of my mother-in-law, Esther, as she lay a few hours before her death. Her husband, Herb, stood by the bedside, stroking the gray curls on her forehead, a slight gesture. It seemed to wave away 50 years of sorrow and disappointment and strife, leaving only the love he felt for her in the beginning, like a seedling under the ruins of a city.

He could have abandoned her years before -- not for another woman, but for what the world calls peace. Dad is not a Catholic, so he had no Church precept to warn him against divorce. He didn't need any. "You never know what you'll get in life," he put it to me once. "You have to do the right thing, because if you don't, you'll probably make things worse." So he never left, and at the last moment of Esther's life he was there, fulfilling a patient vigil, his eyes red with weariness and loss.



"Moses allowed our forefathers to present their wives with a bill of divorce," said the Pharisees to Jesus. "For what cause do you think a man may put away his woman?"

Consider them the pundits of that time, eager to learn whether on this matter of public policy the preacher from Galilee would position himself on the left or the right. Would he agree that you could divorce your wife for burning the soup, or would he hold out for a far narrower range of grounds -- adultery, for instance?

But Jesus rejected the terms of the question. "Moses permitted you to divorce," he said, "because of the hardness of your hearts; but it was not so from the beginning. Therefore you have heard it said that a man should leave his mother and father and cleave to his wife, and they two shall become one flesh. So I say to you that any man who puts away his woman -- I am not

talking about fornication here -- and marries another, commits adultery." He concludes with a stern admonition: "What God has joined together, let no mere man put asunder."

We may be too familiar with these words. They should strike us with the same shock that once silenced the Pharisees, or enraged them, when the Lord reached back behind all the history of the Israelites, behind the Temple and the kings and the judges and the tribes, behind even creation itself, as He said, "Before Abraham was, I AM." Here alone, in this discussion of marriage, does Jesus answer a question about good and evil and human life by appealing to the time before the Fall. "It was not so," he says, "from the beginning." It was no part of God's plan for innocent mankind. It can be no part of God's plan for man regenerate in Christ.

Jesus has presented to us two potent truths, each unbearably alive and full of import for fallen man, yet leaving it to us to connect them. The first has been celebrated joyfully by Pope John Paul II: Man and woman are made for one another. Our bodies, our very souls are stamped with a nuptial meaning, and in the embrace of man and woman, an embrace that in God's providence can bring into being a living soul, we recall our innocence in the Garden, and we share in and anticipate the wedding feast of the Lord. The second? We were not made for sin and death, for alienation from one another and from God, our life. That too was not so from the beginning.

Make the connection. Culture of divorce, culture of death.



If any man had cause for procuring a divorce, short of adultery and mayhem, my father-in-law had it. Esther was a difficult woman to live with. Over a trifle, as when we should leave for the diner, she could go into a towering rage, then storm off to her bedroom, her face set like flint, certain that she was right, that she was ill-used by everyone, and woe to my wife if she tried to reason with her. "Gram's on the warpath,"

she'd say. She could jest about it then, nervously, but when she was a girl she didn't dare bring any of her friends to the house, for fear that her mother would cause a scene. Hers was a lonely childhood.

What caused this habitual anger, I can't say. Perhaps a deep insecurity, a hunger to be loved; her own mother was by all accounts a tyrant in the household. When Esther returned home with Herb from their elopement, her father said to him, "If you can live with her, more power to you." And she was her father's favorite.

For a few years they lived together happily, in unlikely conditions: quarters for married midshipmen at a naval base in the Bahamas. They always spoke about that time with wistful humor. The poverty was something they shared and couldn't help, so they took it in stride, and made jokes about how much they grew to hate bananas. Esther was also one of those women who genuinely enjoys the company of men, and whom men will treat with a big-brother jocularly and kindness. Those years were good for them.

Then they settled down in New Jersey, where they would live most of their lives. Dad is a sharp man and a hard worker, holding down two and three jobs all his life before he retired. But for a while money was tight, and though Esther grew up with eleven other children in a rented house with an earthen floor, or maybe because she grew up in such straits, she never learned any measure in her spending. She was one of the most generous people I've known, lavishing my children with Christmas presents, but she spent on herself, too. She wanted nice things they could not afford. So she upbraided her husband about his pay, and went to work herself.

My wife was born then, and maybe all would have been well had Esther been able to trust her husband's industry and thrift, and had she not been afflicted by a painful condition that compelled her to have a hysterectomy. It was a severe loss. In her frustration she took a job at a monstrous candy mill, working at rotating shifts, two weeks in the day, two weeks in the evening, two weeks in the dead of night. The body

never accustoms itself to that; it is always sleep-deprived. So she took to having a nightcap before bed. Then she fell in with some cynical companions at work who also liked to drink. Soon she was an alcoholic.

Many readers will be able to fill in the details. She was impossible to predict; sometimes ingratiating, sometimes as unappeasable as rock. She would throw cups and dishes about the kitchen. Her fists were not idle. She'd shut herself in her room for days of terrible silence. She insisted on separate bank accounts, throwing it in Dad's teeth that it was her money, that she made more than he did (for a year or so this was true), and that she could spend it as she pleased. My wife cannot remember when they shared the same bed.

But to her credit, Esther recognized that Dad was a terrific father, and in her own way she was true to him. Nobody else dared criticize him -- but she would humiliate him publicly. He didn't care, or didn't let on. They could unite only in their love for their daughter, whom they showered with gifts, partly to compensate for their inability to give her what she wanted more than anything, namely love for one another. Finally, when she was 15 and presumably capable of surviving the blow, her mother approached her with bad news.

"I can't take it anymore! Your father and I are getting a divorce."

But divorce was still rare in those days, and my wife hadn't entertained the possibility. It was as if someone had told her that her little world, so fraught with suffering, so fragile, yet so beloved, would be smashed to bits. She broke down in bitter tears. Her mother backed away, and God would bless her for it. The word "divorce" was never uttered again.



Divorce destroys a world; it smothers an echo of Eden. What was the Fall, if not man's first attempt to divorce? "Where are you, Adam?" calls God in the cool of the evening. "You haven't come out to meet me as you used to do." Adam is steeped in shame. He doesn't want to be seen. Consider the unselfconsciousness of

little children who parade naked in front of their parents, because they sense no separation; they feel themselves to be at one with mother and father. Only later, with a growing sense of separate identity, and a growing loneliness, does the child wish to hide. Adam is hiding not because he is naked, but because he is alienated from God, and it is that separation that causes him to look upon his nakedness, an emblem of his own being, with shame.

But the severance could not end there. When Adam and Eve admit their guilt -- a graceless and skulking admission -- they chisel the fissure more deeply, divorcing themselves from one another and from creation. "It was this woman you gave to be my help," says Adam. "She gave me the fruit, and I ate it." Eve passes the blame in turn. "It was this serpent you created! He tricked me, and I ate the fruit."

What can we expect should follow? The very earth shuns us. The ground shall bear thorns and thistles, and in the sweat of his brow must man eat his bread; the woman will bear children in pain, and will have to submit to the domination, not the loving headship, of her husband. Their children grow up in separate pursuits -- Abel a shepherd, Cain a farmer -- and in envy for a blessing he lacks and does not sincerely desire, Cain slays Abel, not in rage, but in cold malice. When God accosts him, as he once accosted Adam, we see in Cain's reply that the fissure has widened into a chasm. "Am I my brother's keeper?" he sneers.

There you have the motto for a culture of divorce. Cain's words assume that the brother, the parent, the spouse, the neighbor is not worth keeping. What to do with one who obstructs my will, or casts a pall over my daydreams? If I can get away with it, and if I am angry enough, I put him away. No matter. Around any house or barn there's plenty of noisome matter to be buried, shoveled over, cast into a pit, or burnt. We rid ourselves of the sights and smells.

Cain begins in Genesis a saga of family strife, occasioned by lust or greed or envy. Lamech is a multiple murderer, and proud of it. Men begin to take several wives. Lot listens to his grumbling men and

separates from Abram, taking that fateful left turn toward Sodom. After Sarah finally conceives a child, she cannot bear the sight of the woman she had encouraged to become Abraham's concubine, so she forces her husband to send Hagar and Ishmael away into the desert. Though God would bring forth good from her guile, Rebecca causes deadly enmity between her sons when she tricks Isaac into giving his blessing to Jacob and not Esau. Jacob's uncle Laban tricks him into marrying Leah, whom he does not love, and then extorts seven additional years of work from him in exchange for Rachel, whom he does love. The intense rivalry between the two sister-wives causes a rift in the family between the sons of Leah and the sons of Rachel, whom old Jacob favors. One of those sons, Joseph, is hurled down a well by his brothers, then sold into slavery.

If heaven is filled with life and light, a wedding feast to celebrate the marriage of the Lamb to his bride the Church, then hell, as C. S. Lewis imagined it, may be the Great Divorce, a realm of alienation, whose "citizens" detest even the thought of a city, and who wish, in an endlessly fissiparous parody of the Heavenly Jerusalem, to move further and further away into the outskirts, to put as much distance between themselves and God (and their neighbors in damnation) as possible. Dante saw it too: One of the traitors in his *Inferno*, fixed in ice up to his head along with all the others of his ilk, defines his neighbor simply as that one "with his head in my way to block my sight" -- a head that will annoy him for all eternity, and that he would gladly lop off if he could, with no more compunction than if he should swat a fly.



But Herb and Esther never departed for that gray city that promises much and delivers nothing. They stayed with one another; they endured. They kept their vows. "Son of Man," said the Lord God to Ezekiel as he stood before a valley of dry bones bleaching in the desert sun, "tell these bones to rise." And from those vast dead sands they did arise.

Not immediately. They sent their daughter to college, and after years of wandering in the academic wasteland, joining a tent revival, falling away, brought closer to the Lord by a rabbi, a musician or two out at heels, a good old girl from Tennessee, a motorcycling professor of Milton, and a lover of Crashaw, she ended up in North Carolina, where we met; and I had left my own footprints over many a desert mile. Each of us became the instrument by which the Lord brought the other one home. We fell in love; we worshiped together at Mass. At our wedding, our priest delivered a sermon on the Song of Songs, and on the righteous souls in Revelation, the communion of saints whose robes have been washed white in the blood of the Lamb.

I have a picture of Herb walking down the aisle with my wife. He looks embarrassed, as if he couldn't tell how he had come to be there. He had been raised in an evangelical church. His father, a sternly righteous man, took the faith seriously, but imparted little of the joy of it to his children. Herb's churchgoing did not survive the Navy. Esther, meanwhile, had been raised with hardly any religion at all. She may have attended a Dutch Reformed church for a few years as a child, but her parents paid so little attention to it that they failed to have her baptized. By the time we were married she had given up drink for good, and the AA meetings she attended may have turned her toward the Bible; or maybe she had turned on her own. In any case, though she was ashamed to be found in a church on Sunday, she read a little of the Bible every night, in secret.

I don't know if, except for marriages and funerals and an occasional Easter long ago, Herb and Esther had ever been in a church together. I do know that *our* marriage, and *our* increasing steadfastness in the Faith, made them happy. They suddenly had something new to unite them. If they could not love one another, or at least not admit to it, they could together love my wife and me, and then the little girl and the little boy we brought them -- the only grandchildren they would ever have. Esther was a hard woman, but she had also the corresponding virtue of loyalty. If you hurt someone she loved, she might never forgive you, but if you loved the one she loved, her heart would swell in gratitude. Now

she and Herb had unexpected reasons to be grateful to one another. They could tattoo their house with pictures of the toddlers, who adored them in their turn, as was just.



"God is not the God of the dead," said Jesus to the Sadducees, whose hearts were too cramped to believe in any resurrection, "but of the living." To accept divorce as a way of death -- no way of *life* -- is to deny the very being of God as revealed by Jesus. It is to say that love can, or should sometimes be permitted to, die utterly. But had God so acted toward us, all this universe would have winked out of existence at the first sin of Adam. With every sin we commit, we pretend to sever ourselves from the fount of our being, as if we were lords of life and death; yet should God respond to us in kind, we would find the divorce complete, and would fall into the nothingness of everlasting loss. But He does not do so, and at the last moment, like the thief on the cross who joined the others in their jeering, but who then thought better of it -- and maybe it took the torment of crucifixion to wake him -- we may turn to Christ and hear him say, "This day you shall be with me in Paradise." Christ did not put away that dying criminal. So much the better for us, who are all criminals, dying.



Esther too was dying, though nobody but my wife noticed it. "Something's wrong with Gram. She remembers things that never happened." Old age, I supposed. Esther did not look like she was about to depart. She still fought mercilessly with her husband. She still squandered her money, though it had been many years since illness had forced her to retire from the factory. She still raged against how badly everyone treated her. She still slammed the door to her room, to hide, to be miserable; and, at night, to open her Bible, though she never talked about it.

But she was suffering a series of small strokes, as we learned much later. These strokes compromised her memory and her ability to get things done around the house. Herb never complained. He'd always been

handy, and now he began, unobtrusively, to take on chores she could no longer perform, sweeping and vacuuming, loading the washer, tending the garden, along with all his old chores and his hard work, post-retirement, at his auto junkyard. The strange thing was that as Esther's memory faded, so did her rumination upon all the wrongs she thought people had done to her. Weakness wore away the edges of her anger.

All this took more than ten years. It was punctuated by times of madness, when she would storm out in the dead of night and pound on a neighbor's door, because a "strange man" was in her house -- her husband; or when on a snowy Christmas night she forgot that she was visiting us 250 miles away, and insisted that she was going to walk home. I had to sleep in front of the door to bar her way. But in general she was softening, mellowing. When, after his open-heart surgery, Herb could no longer take care of her and she had to move to the county home, she was pleasant to the nurses and the beauticians, and would brighten up whenever anybody came to see her. Herb visited her three or four times every week, which was as often as her condition could bear, wheeling her down to the solarium where they would talk with other patients and visitors for the whole afternoon.

Esther could be most kind when she wanted to be, and could accept kindness too, but for much of her married life she would not accept it from her husband. Now, as she grew more helpless, she was glad to accept it from him, and he gave it without stint. She called him, in a moment of tenderness and lucidity, her "savior." She was not far wrong. His most important act of kindness he performed just before his operation and her entering the nursing home. He'd become friends with a local Presbyterian minister, a genuine believer in Christ. Now he knew that Esther was too ashamed to admit that she hadn't been baptized. He also knew that if he were to suggest a baptism, she would reject it in anger and hurt, and that would be the end of that. So he told everything to Pastor Forbes, and invited him to visit now and then, so that Esther would get to know him. Then the subject might come up unbidden, or certain suggestions might be made. So he did; and, not

long before the time would pass when she could reasonably make any decisions she would remember, without any prompting she asked to be baptized. A few days later, Pastor Forbes baptized my mother-in-law, a frail old woman but at last a daughter of God, in her own kitchen, christening her in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.



We in a culture of death hunger after life, but on our own terms, and at the expense of others, even at the expense of their lives. But some of us will only begin really to live when we have lost all capacity to pretend that we are our own. That is one of the meanings of Jesus' mysterious saying, that unless we become like little children, we shall not enter the kingdom of God. Esther now entered that childhood, and Herb was there, to feed her, to wheel her about when she could no longer walk, to talk to her even toward the end, when a massive stroke had left her still wishing to speak, but unable to form more than one or two intelligible words.

And he was beside her those last few days, making sure, if by some miracle she regained the ability to swallow, that the hospital staff would not abandon her to starvation. He would not allow them to hasten her death with morphine, prescribed less often to alleviate pain than to soothe the onlookers and free the doctors and nurses from the ennui of a natural death. We watched by turns at the bed of the dying woman, not because we believed there was something magical about squeezing out each breath from the clamp of death, but because it was the right thing to do. She was going to die, but we didn't want her to die alone. The dying life was a mystery. It was not our place to abandon it, to cast it away as inconvenient, as trash, as we are urged to do to so much else in our barren lives.

How can we know what fleeting notes of grace came to her in those last hours? If God wills, who can obstruct Him? After nearly 53 years of struggle and disappointment, yet 53 years of faithfulness and duty, Herb stood by, never divorced. The Lord God, against whom she had sinned the more mightily, never turned

from calling her back to Him, and as a child of over 70 years she finally answered that call.

What keeps people from believing that a good God loves them and desires never to be parted from them, unless they themselves should flee that love? Look in the mirror, and see the cause of despair in others. Do not repeat the words of the great divorcer at the bottom of hell, who says in his loneliness and misery, "I am my own, I am my own." Say rather, "I am a wayward child, and the one I am called to stand beside is a wayward child." Do not dare mull over your "quality of life" and your "fulfillment" -- wrapped in a shroud of deadly self-regard, while the Lord of life, who dies to bring you to life, gasps for His last breath on the cross above. If anyone had grounds for divorce, He had; no one ever loved as deeply as He, and no one was ever betrayed as He. You, reader, have betrayed Him shamelessly, as have I. Yet He remains faithful, and waits for us, to bring us life:

And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

And He that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new.

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