Stretched across the middle of the Pacific Ocean is a clump of material known as the Giant Ocean Trash Vortex. This is a collection of litter that has been brought together by the currents and concentrated in an area that is by some estimates twice as large as the state of Texas. About 80% of the material in that vortex comes from land-based activities in either North America or Asia, and the number one component is plastic. Some researchers suggest that as much as 26 tons of plastic is added to the ocean each year.

Why is there that much plastic in the ocean? Well, for starters, because there’s 260 tons of new plastic created every year. And why do we make so much plastic? For lots of reasons, but one stands out this morning: plastic bottles. Forget the detergent bottles and the salad dressing bottles – Americans throw away 35 billion water bottles every year.

It wasn’t always like that, of course. Fifty years ago, when you bought a drink, the drink came in a thick glass bottle, and the price you paid for it included a deposit on the container. You drank the beverage and then returned the bottle and got your deposit back; the container was washed and re-used. Around 1965, someone had the bright idea to sell beverages in bottles that didn’t need to be re-used, and the “No Deposit, No Return” industry was born. Manufacturers began selling pop and beer and juice and water in thin glass or plastic bottles that didn’t
need to be returned. It was a little cheaper for the consumer and a lot easier for the manufacturers.

There was, however, a side effect: there was an astounding increase in the amount of litter. Once the bottles had no value, people cared less about where they ended up. Within a very short period of time, the notion of what constituted an acceptable means of selling drinks changed, and empty beverage containers came to be regarded merely as “waste -- unwanted and unvalued, simply delivery mechanisms that become a problem as soon as we have consumed the beverage they once contained.” Almost immediately there was a plan to mandate the collection of deposits on all beverage containers, but the retail food industry fought those changes tooth and nail. One New York grocer said that his business was “selling goods, not collecting trash.”

And so we have an island in the Pacific Ocean, larger than the state of Texas, comprised of garbage.

In Jesus’ day there was a spirited disagreement regarding sex and religion. One group of faithful Jews, led by a Rabbi named Shammai, taught that Deuteronomy 24:1 was a command to be taken literally, and that divorce was only an option following a gross indecency on the part of one’s wife. Another group, led by a Rabbi named Hillel, argued for a very broad interpretation of that passage, and so taught that divorce was an option for a man who was offended not only by his wife’s infidelity, but by the fact that she was a lousy cook, or she ‘dishonored’ him, or if she had the nerve to be less attractive than his new neighbor or co-worker.

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1 Both quotes from this paragraph are from “A Pocket History of Bottle Recycling”, Atlantic Monthly, February 2013 http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/02/a-pocket-history-of-bottle-recycling/273575/
I'll let you take one guess as to who was a more popular Rabbi in those days – at least among men.

The teaching of Hillel reflected the presupposition that a marriage was not really about a relationship of trust and intimacy with another person – it was really about what I was liable to get out of it. I get married to the girl next door, and everything is well and good. And then someone else comes along – someone who is a better cook, or who lets me clean my fish on the kitchen table without arguing, or who never loses my socks in the dryer, and I am free to get rid of #1 and move on to #2, where I'll be deliriously happy until #3 comes into the picture...

In other words, some of the most religious people in Jesus’ day were treating the wives of their friends the way that we treat empty Snapple bottles today: as waste – unwanted and unvalued, simply delivery mechanisms that become a problem as soon as we have consumed the usefulness they once contained.

Not surprisingly, Jesus has something to say about this.

The Pharisaical culture that surrounded Jesus was concerned with possible grounds for divorce. They heard some of the Old Testament words, such as Deuteronomy 24, that allow for divorce in the case of “indecency” as commands to be followed. Divorce, while not a good thing in and of itself, was not a big deal, spiritually speaking. It was a messiness through which one went and then came out, most often with a younger, prettier, wealthier, better-cooking wife.

Jesus, on the other hand, was concerned with the goodness of marriage. He looked at the words of Moses and
said that they were a “concession” because of the ways that people’s hearts are hardened. And then he put divorce in the same category as adultery.

And again, it’s hard to imagine anyone who actually knew Jesus would be surprised by this. Do you remember the so-called “ground rules” for Christian living as illustrated in the Beatitudes? Disciples are called to be poor in spirit, and meek, and humble. As St. John Chrysostom preached in the fourth century, “For he that is meek, and a peacemaker, and poor in spirit, and merciful, how shall he cast out his wife? He that is used to reconcile others, how shall he be at variance with her that is his own?”

Last time, we talked about the fact that Jesus branded lust a violation of the other person because it is selfish and manipulative. How much more is this casual dismissal of the marriage vows out of line with God’s intention?

Jesus condemns the ease with which his contemporaries sought to dispose of marriages because such behavior is counter to God’s intentions for the ways that we are supposed to treat each other. In doing so, he is very much in line with the prophet Malachi, who used the language of violence to describe the ways that his contemporaries were using divorce as a means to justify their own selfish behavior. In Malachi’s voice, God is even sarcastic as he compares the way that some of Malachi’s contemporaries changed their marriages the way that they changed their clothing.

So what are the implications for us? I mean, it’s good to hear that Jesus has little patience with those who treat covenantal relationships as though they are disposable, but what do these words mean to us, today?

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More specifically, how do we hear these words right now? I mean, look around the room: there are a lot of people here who have gone through the trauma of a divorce. For many, this is an open, festering wound. What does Jesus say to us? How are we supposed to react when Jesus brings up this topic?

It’s times like these when I return to that astounding theologian of the 1970’s and 1980’s, Rocky Balboa. There’s a wonderful scene in the first *Rocky* movie where the aspiring boxer has received a chance to fight the champ. At first, he’s excited, but as the event draws closer, he is unsure. The night before the match, he leaves his apartment and wanders the streets, filled with self-doubt. Rocky visits his girlfriend, Adrian, who responds to his situation in a very Christ-like way:

Rocky: I can't do it.
Adrian: What?
Rocky: I can't beat him.
Adrian: Apollo?
Rocky: Yeah. I been out there walkin' around, thinkin'. I mean, who am I kiddin'? I ain't even in the guy's league.
Adrian: What are we gonna do?

Isn’t that amazing? She doesn’t try to talk him out of his fear; she doesn’t yell at him to train harder; she doesn’t give him a ‘dope slap’ and say, “Of course you can’t beat him – and you’re an idiot for even thinking you could!” She sits with him in the place where he is and says, “What are we gonna do?”

That, beloved, is the question that faces us this morning. I don’t care if you’ve been married for 60 years or you’ve never been on a date – when we consider the words of Jesus when it comes to covenant love, our best response has got to be, “What are we gonna do?”
Most of you have sat through at least one or two weddings for which I’ve been privileged to be the officiant. For the few in the room who’ve not been at one of those gatherings, let me tell you something that happens every time I stand up here, usually as the less-attractive person wearing a white dress: We talk about the ways that the community is invested in the relationship that we’ve come to bless, and about the ways that the community will be blessed by the marriage that is occurring.

I really mean that. When two people are in love, and they have their own little relationship, well, that’s great. I’m happy for them, and they generally appear to be pretty darn happy themselves. But when they announce that love and seek to walk with that love into the estate or covenant of marriage, then that love moves from being their own private possession to being a means by which they and the community together tell the story of God’s investment in the creation. Marriage is deeply personal, but it is not private – marriage belongs to the whole people, even though only two individuals are directly engaged.

With that in mind, then it seems as though the first thing that we do is to affirm that divorce is not God’s intent. The tearing apart of a marriage is painful and difficult and messy – it’s a place that nobody wants to be. Divorce is antithetical to a covenantal view of the other. That kind of breach in relationship is not a gift.

Having said that, of course, we do well to point out what I hope is the obvious truth: that sometimes divorce is the option that is least bad. Sometimes the marriage has been so eviscerated by abuse or neglect or violence that the only way forward is through the bitterness of separation and divorce. That’s just how it is, and many of you in the room know more
about that than I do. Nobody ever gets married hoping for the joy of a divorce; but there are times when it’s the best way to move forward in the life to which we’ve been called.

In response to that, then, it would behoove us to commit ourselves to building a community where people are seen as beings of worth and value in and of themselves, rather than as objects for my own personal use or abuse. We need to create a climate where trust, not manipulation, is the cornerstone of relationships; a community where forgiveness is practiced. The church needs to be a place where our mistakes, our pain, or the abuse of our past does not define us and where models of faithful living and reconciliation are shared.

There was an instant during a recent wedding when I almost burst into tears in the middle of the sermon. It wasn’t because I was so happy for the couple preparing to enter into that covenant, and it wasn’t because I was so embarrassed by my preaching. No, what brought your pastor to the brink of tears that day was the sight of so many of you in the congregation at whose weddings I’ve been privileged to officiate. I was struck and humbled by the ways that you have lived your lives in the months, years, or decades since that day; the joys that you’ve shared and the pain you’ve endured; the hard places – including divorce – that many have been… and yet there you were, again, doing your best to live into the kind of community where people are free to make outlandish promises to one another in front of the rest of us, knowing that they are not alone in that.

What are we gonna do?

We have noted at several points in this exploration of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus does not intend either to point people to an impossibly high ideal or to heap shame and guilt on those who have somehow failed to live up to the standard
that he appears to be setting. As we consider the brokenness of divorce and the pain that we can cause each other in relationship, let us remember that our calling is to rise up from our seats around the teacher after the Sermon on the Mount and create a community of disciples where all are valued and all are called to celebrate and honor covenants.

If the Pacific Ocean is full of the debris from billions of discarded beverage bottles, how much more are our lives swamped by the pain of broken promises, unfulfilled potential, and eroded trust? We gather here this morning and listen to Jesus, not because we claim to be less-broken than those who are around us, but because we know that if there is any hope for healing at all, it will come first from Him, and then from our willingness to treat each other not as objects of fleeting desire but as those who bear the image of the One who calls us into his body – the place of restoration and growth for generations yet to come. Thanks be to God! Amen.