

Stories of exile: Children of divorce

by [Elizabeth Marquardt](#) in the [February 21, 2001](#) issue

The parable of the Prodigal Son is often used to illustrate the gracious and steadfast nature of God's love. Most of us can recognize and even identify with the characters—the younger son who strikes out on his own and makes costly mistakes, the responsible elder son who always does what is expected of him, and the long-suffering father, who shows love and constancy. But for some people the father figure in the story is unrecognizable. Many people feel that one or both of their own parents were never there for them, and as a result they may find it difficult to apprehend the parable's message about the all-embracing love of God.

Certainly there have always been troubled family relationships, including in Jesus's time. Many people have experienced the kinds of conflict with a parent that might influence their understanding of scripture. Yet unprecedented family changes have marked the past few decades. Since the 1960s we have witnessed a precipitous increase in the number of marriages ending in divorce. The rate of divorce stabilized in the mid-'80s at its present number of almost one out of two marriages. Consequently, many of today's 20- and 30-year-olds have experienced the divorce of their parents. This entire generation of young adults has been deeply affected by living in a society in which the possibility of lasting commitment is viewed with suspicion and sometimes despair.

Yet our culture and our churches have asked relatively few questions about the experience of children of divorce. At most, we have assumed that divorce affects children during the first months or years after their parents part. We have failed to recognize that their parents' divorce shapes the spiritual journeys of people throughout their lives. Ministries that have assumed a two-parent, intact family structure may not work well for people who did not grow up in such families. In order to welcome young adults—to teach, counsel and comfort them—the church must do a better job of understanding and including their distinctive experience and perspective.

Over the past several years I have conducted formal interviews with adult children of divorce and held informal conversations with many more. During these discussions I often ask them to reflect on specific biblical passages such as the parable of the Prodigal Son or the commandment to honor one's father and mother. Frequently the responses of children of divorce differ greatly from the way religious leaders approach these texts.

At a Protestant seminary one student whose parents were divorced told me that the parable of the Prodigal Son held little resonance for her. She said, "I was always kind of the dutiful one—the one traveling distances to be sure I saw my mother, traveling distances to be sure I saw my father." She had friends for whom the story meant a great deal because "they feel like they've gone away and rejected their families and come back. But my family didn't even give me anything to reject. There wasn't a stable enough thing to go away from or come back to." An evangelical Christian told me that he sees his father in the role of the Prodigal Son, leaving the family to seek his own fortune elsewhere. This child of divorce saw himself in the role of the father, waiting at the door for his loved one to return.

When I asked the ministry student to reflect on the Fourth Commandment, she shook her head and said, "It means nothing to me. I don't have any concept of my parents as authority figures. I don't know if this is because of the divorce, but I came to know them as completely fallible human beings." A young man who is Roman Catholic told me, "If you want to be a believer and you're a kid of divorce, you really have to reflect on that commandment. You have to ask, Are they honoring each other? Did they honor you? Did they even ask you before they decided to divorce?" Another Catholic told me, "I have a hard time with that one. I honor my parents because I love them, but there are things they do I don't believe in, there are things they do that make me very angry, things I can't honor."

A young man who considers himself spiritual but doesn't identify with any particular faith tradition observed: "Well, in theory the commandment makes a lot of sense to me. But if your mother and father are not honorable people, then they don't deserve to be honored. My father doesn't think about the people who rely on him. He made a commitment to a spouse. He had a child. And then he didn't find a way to honor his commitments to them."

Clearly, children of divorce bring a complicated feeling of loss to their encounter with biblical texts. Those who continued to see both parents after the divorce in a sense

still “had” their parents, but family life was forever changed. After divorce children lose easy, unplanned access to at least one parent, and can almost never be with both parents at the same time. A reunion with one’s father involves a parting from one’s mother, and vice versa. As a teenaged boy told *Newsweek*, “When you’re a child of divorce, you’re always missing somebody.” Divorce often strains and sometimes even completely severs the child’s relationship with at least one parent, often the father.

Children of divorce also experience many other kinds of loss. Often divorce means moving to another house, neighborhood or community. Children lose their homes, neighborhoods, friends and favorite places. Divorce changes children’s relationships with their extended families and family friends, whom they may see much less frequently or not at all after the divorce.

One adult told me about the strong relationship he had had with his father’s secretary and her daughter before his parents’ divorce, recalling that “they were really like an extended family.” But after the divorce, “They were uncomfortable and didn’t know what to do, and they just disappeared.” Since remarriages end in divorce more frequently than first marriages do, the child may also lose the world that comes with a new marriage—stepparent and siblings, home and new routines.

Grief, the natural human response to loss, is hard for people to navigate alone. Children, especially, need people to help them understand and name the confusing mixture of emotions that grief produces. The grief precipitated by the changes brought by divorce continues to surface during subsequent stages of children’s lives—at the beginning of adolescence, at the time of leaving home, during courtship and marriage, at the birth of one’s own children and so forth. One young woman whose parents divorced when she was two told me that she first cried about that divorce when she was 22. She was imagining her wedding day and wondering whether her father would walk her down the aisle. When she considered asking both her mother and father to walk with her, she found herself overwhelmed with tears.

Children of divorce often also experience anger, another natural response to loss. Anger is a threatening emotion. Most people fear its potential to wreak havoc and to hurt people. It is an emotion that we seek to regulate as adults and that few adults will tolerate in children. The anger children feel about their parents’ divorce is further complicated by the vulnerability of those parents and the children’s desire to protect them. One young man said, “I was definitely initiated into adulthood in a way

that was totally inappropriate, and if I had been really aware of what was happening, I would have been, like, this sucks.” When I asked him if he had expressed his feelings, he said, “At times, but I was also really protective of my parents. I just did not spend a lot of time complaining about them.” Not surprisingly, many children of divorce suppress their anger.

Left unrecognized and unacknowledged, this grief and anger lead to despair and contribute to the high rates of clinical depression, suicidal thoughts and actual suicides among children of divorce. One young man remembers that in the years following his parents’ divorce, “I really thought about suicide a lot. There was a lot of angst and pain and I didn’t know how to deal with it. I really seriously thought about just turning it off.” Even young people who are neither clinically depressed nor suicidal may feel isolated by their grief and anger. They experience childhood differently than do children in intact families, but no one thinks to ask them about their experience. As they grow older, children of divorce often feel set apart and very much alone. This makes it especially important to welcome them into the church.

A theological metaphor that richly describes the complex experience of children of divorce is the biblical story of the exile. As divorced parents are swept up into rebuilding their lives, their children often feel relegated to the margins. As parents take on new jobs, lovers or spouses, their children lose the attention they once received from their mothers and fathers. Like the Israelites grappling with exile, children of divorce experience a baffling range of emotions. Yet the biblical story does not stop with exile. God promises a return home, a deliverance from isolation, a restoration of wholeness. How, then, might children of divorce experience this journey?

How might the church welcome and aid them? Following are some practical suggestions for how to reach out to and include this generation of young adults more fully in the life of the church.

- **Preaching and teaching.** The understanding that different family experiences produce different interpretations of biblical texts should mark preaching and teaching. There has been very little discussion of family issues, especially divorce, in liberal Protestant churches. Many of these churches are afraid to talk about divorce for fear of alienating divorced people. Yet it is fully possible both to emphasize the importance of marriage and to affirm the experiences of single and divorced

parents.

- **Counseling.** While some marriages are so destructive that they must be ended for the safety of those involved, many low-conflict marriages may be saved. A recent study based on national data demonstrated that about a third of divorces arise out of marriages characterized by violence or abuse, and the children of those marriages did better after those divorces. But two-thirds of divorces arise from low-conflict marriages characterized mostly by boredom or unhappiness, and the children of those marriages did worse after those divorces.

An array of marriage-education courses exist to guide couples in rediscovering or strengthening intimacy and enjoyment in their relationships. (A full listing of these courses may be found at www.smartmarriages.com.) Recommend these opportunities in premarital and marital counseling sessions and make sure that the members of your congregation know where to find them.

Be aware that children have a fundamentally different experience of divorce than adults do. The adult who has decided to end a marriage may see divorce as liberation and a chance for a new beginning. But children inevitably experience divorce as loss, since it means the end of their families and familiar ways of life. If parents must divorce, encourage them to maintain as much continuity as possible for their children, perhaps by raising them near grandparents and other extended family members and by maintaining strong connections to family friends.

Also, encourage the parents to stay connected to the church. Among the many disruptions of divorce, church attendance is often a casualty. Be careful not to subsume the child's perspective under that of the adults and to give the child the special support that she or he needs. Also, remember that a person whose parents divorced five, ten or more years ago may still need special attention.

- **Liturgy.** Some churches are trying to develop liturgies and prayers that can be used at the time of a divorce. While these efforts are well intentioned, they are often woefully neglectful of children's perspectives. For example, the Book of Worship in the United Methodist tradition contains a prayer to be used at the time of divorce that ends with the words "in the name of the One who sets us free from slavery to the past and makes all things new." This sentiment may reflect the experience of some adults, but children do not experience the breakup of their families as being "set free from slavery to the past," nor do they long to have their families "made

new.”

More appropriate might be a liturgy in which parents vowed to remain loving, involved parents to their children. However, a liturgy for the time of divorce might be intimidating rather than comforting to children. Often we are eager to write new liturgies to rectify the church’s inadequate response to some issue. But when vulnerable people, especially children, are involved it might be wise to make sure we understand their experience before we develop new liturgies for them. Nevertheless, we might wish to consider formulating liturgies for the adult children of divorce, or perhaps adapting existing rituals to more adequately reflect their experience.

- **Reaching into the community.** Children of divorce may have lost their faith traditions when their parents’ marriages ended. They may never have been part of a faith community. Or they may have fallen away from the church because they did not find their experience addressed there. But they constitute a substantial part of the young adult population. Those who have experienced the loss of vital relationships know how important and sustaining close relationships can be—with other people, with their communities, with God. In what specific ways can congregations show these children of divorce that the church recognizes and welcomes them? Churches that acknowledge these young people’s experience and reach out to them can become places of wholeness and healing for them.