

Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 7, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child shall not enter it.”

- Mark 10:15

The only way to receive the kingdom of God is in the arms of Jesus. Only through Jesus taking you into His arms, laying His hands on you, blessing you, and forgiving you can you receive the kingdom of God.

It sounds so simple, too simple. To our adult hearts, so conversant in the ways and affects of sin, this is counterintuitive. After all, didn't Jesus just hear His own words on divorce? Yes, He did. And for Jesus these two things fit together perfectly, because it's perhaps nowhere so clearly revealed to us how corrupted and broken the human heart is than in the pain, and even tragic necessity of divorce – which is precisely why we receive the kingdom in this way: through the arms of Christ and Christ alone.

Our Gospel lesson begins as Jesus and the disciples have left Galilee for Jerusalem. Behind them lie the great feats of Jesus' ministry: the sermon on the mount, the stilling of the storm, the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac with the legion of demons, the healing of the woman with the flow of blood, the raising of Jairus' daughter, the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus' walking on water, the feeding of the four thousand, Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah, the call to take up the cross, and the Transfiguration. Before them lies the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the Passover, and then betrayal, trial, crucifixion, death, and resurrection.

As He nears Jerusalem the word that the great prophet from Galilee, the one who may even be the Messiah, spreads among the Jews in Judea. The curious crowds gather, and the Lord teaches them. But so too do the scribes, the Pharisees, and the priests. They've heard about Jesus. But unlike the credulous peasants, they are smart – or at least they like to think they are. They are not going to put their faith in this Messiah unless He can pass their tests and prove to them that He is the Messiah.

And so it is that the Judean Pharisees come to Him with a question to test Him, *“Is it lawful for a man to divorce His wife?”* It's an interesting question. Notice very carefully what they ask and don't ask. They don't ask, is it right or wrong? They don't ask, is it sinful? They ask, is it lawful? In other words, what does Torah say? Is it lawful to divorce?

We need to notice what the question is and isn't because that's where the trap lies. The question is simply, is divorce lawful? Which why Jesus responds with a question of His own. *“What did Moses command you?”*

Jesus knows full well what Moses wrote in the Law. After all Jesus is the very Word of God who spoke the Law to Moses. And nothing Jesus – the Word of God incarnate - says now is going to contradict the Word of God given to Moses. Contrary to popular opinion Jesus doesn't change the lawfulness of divorce.

The Pharisees, answer Jesus' question, *“Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.”* And indeed that's true, the Torah says in Deuteronomy 24, *“Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce...”*

Notice how that's phrased. It's not phrased, “Thus sayeth the Lord, ‘You may divorce your wife...’” No, it's phrased as a hypothetical, *“Suppose a man...”* The passage neither allows nor forbids divorce. It accepts it as a given. As the reality of a broken world filled with broken people.

Again, we see elsewhere in the Old Testament that it is the Lord who commands Abraham to send his wife Hagar away, to divorce her. It is the Lord, who, after the exiles have returned commands them to divorce their foreign wives. Why? Because the wives are leading their husbands away from the Lord.

What does this tell us, first, divorce is lawful. Second, the Lord understands that divorce may be a necessity. As Jesus replies to the Pharisees, *“Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.”* In other words, Jesus is saying, “because of your hardness of heart, and your brokenness, I told him to write this for you.” Jesus wants us to see that this is a concession to our reality, not a permission. In a world of sin, where husbands beat their wives, where husbands and wives lie to each other, cheat on each other, and desire to control, dominate, and oppress each other there must be a mechanism for giving life back to the abused, back the oppressed.

At this point Jesus has said nothing radical. Nor has He overturned the Law. Nor will He. But He will clarify it. The question they really want Him to answer is when is it justified. See, there were some among the Pharisees who said a man could divorce his wife for any reason – she burned the toast, she’s no longer 24, she pointed out that he isn’t either, etc.

Jesus does not dispute whether divorce is lawful. Instead, He points to something else. He points to God’s original purpose, *“But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”*

For Jesus the most decisive thing is not “what is lawful,” but what is God’s purpose with marriage? God’s purpose is not to abuse, not to dominate, not to oppress, not to use, not to throw away. It’s to bring the two halves of humanity together and make them one.

To bring them together because, as God says about Adam in our first lesson, *“It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper as his partner.”* The older English word, “helpmeet” is better. This is not a junior partner, this is not a servant. The suffix, meet, indicates one who is fit, one who fits perfectly with the other.

In Genesis Woman is not an after-thought. She is Man’s completion. She is the helper fit for him, who fits him, precisely because she is flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. She cannot be less than him and be his flesh and bone. She cannot be less than him and be fit for him.

Having made them male and female God marries them to each other so that they will be united in one humanity, one flesh, so that may fittingly help each other. Marriage, Jesus says, has as its purpose the life-long communion between husband and wife; the life-long union with one’s helpmeet.

That’s the purpose, that’s the intention. Saint Paul lifts that up for us in Ephesians 5 when He reminds us, that husbands shall love their wives as their own bodies, as their own flesh, as their own being. For that is what husband and wife are, and they are that so they may help each other through the work of life – it’s joys, it’s mundane-nesses, and it’s trials and tribulations as well. All the while growing together more and more. Indeed, Saint Paul says, the union of marriage is an image of the union of Christ and His Church.

Now, having re-established God’s purpose Jesus still does not say, “Therefore I give you a new commandment, you can never divorce.” The Roman Catholic Church is wrong here. What Jesus says, here in Saint Mark’s Gospel is this, *“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”*

Saint Matthew gives us greater detail of the same story, he gives the fuller account, where Jesus says, *“And I say to you, whoever divorces, his wife, except on grounds of unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.”*

And Saint Paul, in 1st Corinthians, inspired by the Holy Spirit tells us, *“but if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.”*

Given the whole witness of Scripture, the Eastern Church and the Protestant Reformers have understood that there are grounds for divorce. Not only in the narrow sense – physical adultery – but in the broader sense of all forms of grave unfaithfulness – adultery, abuse, abandonment.

In such circumstances the other spouse is free to remarry, for as the Lord says, *“It is not good for man [or woman] to be alone,”* and as Saint Paul says, *“It is better to marry than to burn with passion.”*

Jesus never contradicts the Law, but He raises the bar. Having heard what Jesus teaches about divorce, that you cannot do it simply because she burned the toast, or she isn't 24, and he isn't either. Saint Matthew tells us the disciples reply, *“If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.”*

And it's for this reason that when mothers begin bringing their children to Jesus the disciples turn them away. If that is what the kingdom expects of adults, if that is how hard it is for the adults... surely children have no business being brought to Jesus. If adults can't live up to the kingdom's demands what hope do children have?

Now Jesus flummoxes the disciples. He says to them, *“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”* And He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them.”

The disciples rightly recognize how much the kingdom demands. But as is so often the case with us, they think the lesson is try harder. But that's not what Jesus would have us learn.

In raising the bar on marriage Jesus is not setting up an achievement to unlock. He is exposing how corrupt our hearts are, and how broken we are. That we can take God's own good gift of marriage – a gift meant to give us life, to give us help and support in our work, our trials, our tribulations – and turn it into something by which we destroy others... that says more than we want to know about ourselves. It reveals to us why the kingdom must come to us through the arms of Christ; through the arms of Jesus crucified for us.

For if it is up to us to measure up to the kingdom we will always fail. If it is up to us and how we broken creatures live in a broken world, we will always lose the kingdom. If we are Christ's bride our faithlessness gives Him every reason to divorce us. But He doesn't. Instead He loves His body, He loves us, so much that He gives His life for us. He loves us so much that even when we abandon Him, He comes after us. He loves us so much that He has gone to the cross to win our forgiveness, to the grave to take on our death, so that He may wash us clean, and raise us up to new life.

Jesus knows how difficult it is to receive the kingdom of God. That's why He makes it so simple, so simple even a child can receive it. How simple? Jesus takes you into His crucified arms, lays His crucified hands upon you, and blesses you, forgives you, and there you have the kingdom. Amen.