

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost • October 4, 2015

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Mark 10:2-16

“All of Life: God’s Design”

They used to be so happy. How did it come to this? There they sat, on opposite sides of the conference table with their lawyers beside them, the kind of cliché that they used to joke about when they saw it on TV. Neither of them could say just where this ending had begun. They had arguments from time to time, like married couples do, but it was never anything serious. It just seemed like they each drifted their own way over the years. They thought that their kids should be able to handle the split now that they were both teenagers, and it’s not like they wouldn’t get to see both Mom and Dad on a regular schedule. After all, they wanted what was best for everyone involved. That’s why they were sitting at that conference table, right? They didn’t hate each other; they just didn’t feel that they loved each other anymore.

Have you ever found yourself at a wedding and wondered how long that marriage might last? You’re not alone. Divorce is a real problem, definitely one that you and I might come across here in this day and age. Odds are that you know someone who has experienced a divorce in their immediate family, either as a spouse or a child – you might have gone through that experience yourself. It’s pretty much an accepted fact of life in the United States, one that doesn’t seem the scandal it did only a couple of generations ago. In today’s culture, divorce is just another fairly commonplace milestone in life – not one that people seek out or look forward to, mind you. The general mindset on marriage maintains that it’s about two people loving each other for as long as that love lasts. Should it fail, then why not get a divorce so that you are both free to move on to new loves?

Even Christians hold that divorce is sometimes permissible on specific grounds. The clearest of those, which Jesus notes in Matthew’s account of today’s Gospel reading (Matthew 19:9), is adultery. Back in the first century, pretty much everyone agreed on that point. In that situation, one spouse has abandoned the union that God established between husband and wife by polluting it with sexual immorality. But even then in those cases where divorce might be permitted, it’s never going to be the best thing. By its very nature, divorce is destructive.

In any circumstance, divorce is like slicing a body in two. It takes the people that God has joined into one flesh and rips them apart. How do you recover from that? And beyond the separation of husband and wife, divorce leaves a permanent mark on the children who are themselves evidence of their parents’ union, regardless of their age. Like a stone dropped in a pond, the consequences of a divorce ripple out to friends and family, each ripple a reminder of just how significant marriage is in their shared community.

The problem *behind* the problem of divorce is, simply put, sin. Like it does in all the other aspects of our lives, sin is there as the **hardness of heart** that leads people to want to divorce. It’s at work in each of us, saying “Put yourself first!” Sin wants us to try to master the situations and even the people around us, telling us that our happiness should be our chief goal. Sin is present in all relationships – including the best of marriages – as a consequence of our world’s broken relationship with God. So how can we deal with it? When we’re all people who have sin at work in our hearts, what hope can there be for marriage?

In today’s Gospel, the Pharisees come to Jesus with a question. They’re definitely looking to trap him in his answer, but they might also have been looking for him to settle an actual dispute. Different parties within the Pharisees disagreed on the acceptable grounds for divorce. Some said that adultery was the only allowable circumstance, while others held that a husband could divorce his wife should she cause him the slightest embarrassment. But whatever their background, these Pharisees are hoping that Jesus would speak against Moses and the law. At the very least, they’re hoping that Jesus making a pronouncement on divorce would get him in trouble with Herod. Now Herod had imprisoned (and later beheaded) John the Baptizer precisely because John had spoken out about Herod’s new wife’s divorce from her previous husband, so the Pharisees must have figured they had a pretty good shot at taking care of their Jesus problem here.

If you look at Jesus’ response to the Pharisees, you’ll see that he masterfully sidesteps their trap, getting right to the heart of the matter. Calling *them* to answer as to what Moses had permitted, Jesus addresses the problem behind the problem of divorce, sin, and its opposition to God’s design for marriage. Hardness of heart was keeping the Pharisees – and people in general – from seeing and living in marriage as it was meant to be.

As Jesus lays it out, marriage is not just a human relationship, as our culture sees it. Marriage is a new status given by God to the husband and wife who he joins in the one-flesh union. It's not about two people wanting to be happy; marriage is not founded in feelings, as influential as emotions may be. Accordingly, it's not something to be entered into or dismissed lightly. God designed marriage as a lifelong bond for husband and wife, calling them to serve each other, their family, and their community. Marriage establishes a new family, even before children come into the picture. Jesus notes that God spoke way back in Genesis upon creating man and woman, "*Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*" as we heard in our first reading today. And it was very good. **That's God's design.** Yet we often fall short in our marriages, especially with the problem of divorce.

What happens after divorce? How can someone marry again? Recognizing the problem of divorce is the first step. It is sin, as it goes against God's designed for marriage. But as is the case with all sins, we can repent, turning to God and asking Him for forgiveness in Christ. That repentance is necessary, especially when making a new beginning: re-marriage is still marriage, even if it began in adultery. By God's grace, couples who remarry after a divorce will recognize God's design for marriage in their new union, seeking to avoid the mistakes and hard-heartedness of the past, looking to live as the husband and wife that God calls them to be.

Reinforcing the value of marriage and family that Jesus made with the Pharisees and later with his disciples, Mark's Gospel account moves immediately to an incident where the disciples are acting as bouncers, keeping children and their parents from bothering Jesus. But it's the disciples who end up disturbing Jesus. He rebukes *them*, encouraging the children to come to him to receive his blessing, showing that the blessings of the Kingdom are freely given, even to little children. Childlike trust is a model for faith, as opposed to the disciples' sense of rank. We can and should bring the little children to Jesus!

If you have children, where are they right now? Are they somewhere that they are experiencing God's love and blessing in Christ? As we regularly say here at St. John's, the home is the primary place for faith formation. The local church is here to support you in your role as parents (and godparents) as your children look to you to see how you live out your faith as a family. Should your children be grown and are no longer engaged with a local church, don't lose hope! Continue to pray for them. Continue to show them God's love, even as He loves them in Christ. There's great comfort in knowing that He is the one who is truly in charge, not us.

Hear this good news for all families, for all relationships: Jesus brings healing. He delivers the healing that marriages need as they suffer from our hard-heartedness and sin. He gives strength to admit our failings to our spouses and our children and our friends. He delivers the forgiveness that we need as we fall short in our relationships. In his Word, he gives direction for us all to live according to God's design and to point the little children to the blessings of his Kingdom, freely given.

"All of Life:" if you were here with us last week, you heard how that's the theme for our fall stewardship focus this year. Consider how much time and energy we are called give to marriage and relationships and children. Doesn't it make sense that they should all be part of our look at what it means to be a steward of God's gifts? In each of these areas of life, God calls you and me to make an intentional effort to care for what He's given. But He also supports us in our stewardship.

With Christ at the center of our marriages and families, we can communicate with each other as forgiven people. With Christ as the foundation of our relationships – not mere happiness – we can live in real love as we care for the people around us. With Christ before us and Christ between us, all of life can look like God designed it to be.

Amen.