

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost • October 7, 2018ⁱ

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Mark 10:2-16

“Consecrated: Family” (*Consecrated, Lord, to Thee*, Part 1)

“Consecrated” isn’t a word that we use all that often. We heard it a good bit as we engaged in our “Consecrated Stewards” congregational emphasis last fall, but I’m guessing that it probably hasn’t really been on your radar much since then. The word itself relates to something being set apart for a holy purpose. We grew in our understanding of what it meant to be God’s people who were set apart to put His many blessings to use in life. As we follow Jesus, we live as stewards of his grace, putting his gifts to use in serving others.

As we move into this fall’s focus of “Consecrated, Lord, to Thee,” we’ll be expanding on that concept to learn more about how we can practice whole-life stewardship as Jesus’ disciples. Real stewardship has to be whole-life, since all of life – all that we are and all that we have – it all comes from God. It’s all really His; nothing is truly ours. But it’s pretty easy for us to get confused about that key point. As we journey through the next few weeks in this focus, God’s Word will be lovingly calling us to recognize where we’ve fallen short in our whole-life stewardship... and how He has acted to do something about it.

This week’s readings Old Testament and Gospel readings (and even the psalm!) orbit around God’s gift of family, something that each of us has some experience with, for better and for worse. We’ll talk about some of those different experiences in just a bit, but it’s important for us to understand that God established family as a gift. Marriage, in fact, is one of the gifts that we got to carry out of the Garden of Eden. The family has been instituted by God, intended as a blessing for His creatures. Family is consecrated, set apart for a holy purpose. But we human beings get distracted from that holy purpose, and that’s when we get ourselves – and our families – into all kinds of trouble.

In today’s Gospel, the Pharisees come to Jesus with a question. They’re looking to trap him in his answer; they’re hoping that Jesus would speak against Moses and the Torah. At the very least, they’re hoping that Jesus making a pronouncement on divorce would get him in trouble with Herod. Herod had imprisoned and then 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 getting Jesus out of their way.

Jesus knew what they were doing, and he knew why. The reason for their question is the same reason that ultimately lies behind the problem of divorce, the very issue that the Pharisees are using to try to trip him up. But Jesus, being the *Son of God*, does something that we human beings might have a hard time doing: he speaks to both their question and the problem behind it all at once. As instituted, marriage is meant to be the lifelong union of husband and wife. When divorce happens, it’s as if you’re tearing apart a single organism. It’s going to be painful. It will have lasting consequences. Even though marriage is a gift from God, we can mess it up – and that’s been a problem since long before the Pharisees and Moses, alike.

As he answers the Pharisees, Jesus calls out the real issue: hard-heartedness. Hard-heartedness is another name for the problem of our inward focus, our self-interested-ness. Marriage and family are institutions that God consecrated for service outside of self. They’re intrinsically designed to be about the care of others. Because of our self-interested-ness, we chafe and struggle against that design. We try to dominate or defy. We seek to get our own way instead of lifting others up and caring for them. We get angry. We get selfish. We get resentful. And in our self-interested-ness, we fail to care for those we are called to love.

But the Son of God doesn’t abandon us in our hard-heartedness. He was born as a human being, into a family, to make us part of a new family through his life, death, and resurrection. Without Christ at the center of family, everything falls apart so easily. But through Jesus, we have forgiveness, a gift that we can give and receive in our families, in all their varied forms. The forgiveness that we have in Christ is what makes marriage and family possible for terminally self-interested human beings. It brings us together and restores relationships. Reconciled and restored, forgiven of our self-interested-ness, God frees us for consecrated stewardship of the gifts that He’s given.

Yes, we do have different experiences with family in its many forms. If you’re unmarried, you’ve got family in your parents and siblings. Remember them as people God has given whom you can share his

grace. And if your parents are deceased and you have no siblings, you've still got family: you may be uniquely able to give of yourself to help support your neighbor, and your family of faith in the Church.

If you're married, you've got family right in front of you as a consecrated steward. Serve your spouse in active love that is more about *doing* than *feeling*, supporting them in the unique union of which God has made you a part, with Jesus at its center. Engage in the work of marriage, rejecting the hard-heartedness that prompts you to choose self-interest over caring for this closest neighbor.

If you are raising children, whether they are in your care through birth, adoption, or circumstance, always remember that they have been entrusted to you by God. Recall Jesus' words to his overprotective disciples, "*Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.*"¹⁵ *Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.*" (Mark 10:14-15) Childlike faith is a model to us all. Those children depend on you and look to you to show them Jesus. Indeed, you are to serve them as God's own ambassadors.

There's more to say about whole-life stewardship than we'll have time to explore over the next few weeks. Next year during the season of Epiphany, we'll expand upon the journey we're beginning this month, further considering how God would have us actively engage as consecrated stewards with our time and abilities. In the meantime, though, we'll continue to see how God's Word calls our attention to the importance of stewardship in other aspects of everyday life.

The title of our stewardship focus takes its name from a fairly well-known hymn, "Take My Life and Let It Be." We'll be singing it today as part of this worship service. The first stanza goes, "*Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord, to Thee; take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise.*" The hymn continues: Take my hands, take my feet, take my voice, take my lips, take my silver and gold, take my intellect, take my will, take my heart, take my love, take myself. We follow Jesus knowing that we have nothing to give that God has not already given us. As we move ahead together this fall as consecrated stewards, then, let us enjoy these gifts that God has given, learning how to put them to service by His grace.

Amen.

ⁱ This week's memory passage:

Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." – Mark 10:15 (ESV)