

October 3, 2021  
Mark 10:2-16

Pentecost 19  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“The Ties That Bind”**

“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs.”

*“...if it is your intention to share with each other your joys and sorrows and all that the years will bring, with your promises bind yourselves to each other as husband and wife.”*

I have spoken those words hundreds of times as I have presided at marriage services, on the of the true joys and privileges of ordained ministry. It has given me a “front-row seat” as a couple pledges love and faithfulness to each other for as long as they both shall live. These are times when we gather to witness this uniting in holy matrimony as we pray that God will bless this couple with many years of joy and happiness. Every wedding is an opportunity to give thanks and praise to God for the gift of marriage, which is rooted in God’s creation, which the Lord declared was “very good.”

While I have not kept in touch with every couple at whose marriage service I presided, I know that not all these marriages have stood the test of time. While I am certain that every couple was sincere in their vows of love and faithfulness to one another, not all marriages last, and for many reasons these unions ended in divorce. Sadly, the pain of the dissolution of these marriages has been compounded by church teachings and policies that have been harsh and judgmental toward divorced person. In some churches, divorced people are denied the sacraments and forbidden from remarrying. A divorced person was often ostracized from a congregation that had been their home for years; it was as if they were bearing a “scarlet letter” or were seen as a great sinner unworthy of being among God’s holy people. I have sat with many couples who have come to me in tears when their churches rejected their desire to be remarried to a person with whom they are hoping for a fresh start after experiencing the devastation that is often caused by divorce. In some situations, people have left both the church and the Christian faith altogether because of the harsh treatment and rejection they have received, much of it rooted in interpretations of Jesus’ teaching in today’s Gospel lesson that *“whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”* (Mark 10:11-12).

As with many of Jesus' so-called "difficult teachings," we need to take a close look at this Gospel lesson so that we truly understand what Jesus is proclaiming and so that we do not misunderstand and misuse his words in a manner that is antithetical to what our Lord desires of his people. The setting for this teaching is yet another challenge by the Pharisees, who sought to test Jesus by asking him "*is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?*" (10:2), yet another attempt to entrap Jesus: "*the Pharisees are trying to pin Jesus down, trying to label him, trying to draw him out and perhaps entrap him so that they know better how to deal with him.*" (David Lose). But once again, Jesus will not take the bait and fall into their trap; instead of answering the question, he asks in return "*what did Moses command you?*" What does the Torah teach concerning marriage and divorce? As experts in the Law, they immediately reply that "*Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.*" (10:4), a decree found in the book of Deuteronomy:

- "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, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the LORD, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession." – Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

While this Law does appear to permit divorce, notice that it is completely one-sided; only the man is allowed to divorce his wife – the wife cannot divorce her husband, and she is left with no rights or means of support if such an arbitrary "bill of divorce" is issued. But while they may have been satisfied with their answer and with the "status quo" regarding marriage and divorce, Jesus turns the tables on his opponents by demonstrating that they are only interested in preserving the Law as they understand it, not in doing God's Will. Instead of commenting on the Law by debating the circumstances under which the husband might be permitted to divorce his wife, Jesus "*deflects their question away from matters of the law and turns it instead to relationship and, in particular, to God's hope that our relationships are more than legal matters but instead help us to have and share more abundant life.*" (Lose). Jesus insists that the existence of the law on divorce was "*because of your hardness of heart [that God] wrote this commandment for you*" (10:5). Instead,

Jesus focuses on what God intended for humanity in creation, which precedes the institution of the Law:

- “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.” – 10:6-9.

The Kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus’ ministry does not belong to the hard-hearted, faithless generation with which Jesus constantly has to contend (“*You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?*” – 9:19). “*Asked by the Pharisees whether it is legitimate for a man to dismiss his wife, Jesus advocates for a theology that reinforces the durability of the marital bond.*” (Luis Menendez-Antuna). The Pharisees’ question is tendentious, and Jesus refuses to deal with it on their terms. Twice they speak of what is “lawful” or “allowed”; Jesus, on the other hand, speaks twice about what is “commanded.” Jesus is concerned about the Will of God; his adversaries only care about their own rights and how much they can get away with. What his adversaries design as a trap, Jesus seizes as an occasion to teach about the gracious will of God; this is a further example of Jesus’ teaching “*as one who has authority, and not as the scribes*” (1:22). Divorce is grounded in law, but marriage in creation; Jesus moves the discussion into the area of gift and grace, which is more demanding but also more free. Divorce laws, as with all the Torah, became necessary because of the reality of sin, because we will not learn from God or from one another:

- “We are obstinate and stubborn toward one another and unwilling to accept God’s will for fidelity in marriage. The law of Moses recognizes this fact, but Jesus will not let us believe that God approves these qualities in us or the rupture of human relationships they entail. Instead, he points to the goodness of God’s design in creation and to the goal of a man and a woman living together ‘as heirs of the grace of life.’” – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

Following his encounter with the Pharisees, Jesus’ disciples ask him again about this matter when they are alone “in the house.” Unlike the initial dispute, where only a husband could dissolve the marriage, this formulation assumes the usual Greco-Roman practice in which either party could seek a divorce: “*Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery*” (10:11-12). Although this statement makes Jesus’ understanding of marriage clear, it does not provide the basis

for creating a new legal code concerning marriage and divorce; *“Jesus wishes to insist that God’s intentions for human beings, set forth in the Decalogue, takes priority over other provisions in the Mosaic Law. Jesus does not intend to create new legislation.”* (Pheme Perkins).

Sadly, this teaching of Jesus has often been cited as justification for both church policies and civil laws regarding divorce, condemning persons who seek to remarry as “adulterers.” But we need to remember that the purpose of both the Ten Commandments and all the Torah is to teach God’s people how they are to live as people of the Lord who *“brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”* (Exodus 20:2). The Torah is celebrated by the people of Israel as God’s gift that taught them how to live as a people who were called to be *“a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth”* (Isaiah 49:6), the children of Abraham through whom *“all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* (Genesis 12:3). The Six Commandment – *“You shall not commit adultery”* – was established so that *“we are to fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honours his or her spouse.”* (Small Catechism). It is the teaching of our Lord who intended the gift of marriage *“for the joy and strength of those who enter it and for the well-being of the whole human family”* (Evangelical Lutheran Worship Leaders’ Edition). Jesus’ teaching points to the blessing of love and marriage, and how the dissolution of the bond of holy matrimony is not in keeping with God’s intention for humanity in creation, in a world God declared to be “very good.”

- “Let it be said in conclusion that this commandment requires all people not only to live chastely in deed, word, and thought in their particular situation (that is, especially in marriage as a walk of life), but also to love and cherish the spouse whom God has given them. Wherever marital chastity is to be maintained, above all it is essential that husband and wife live together in love and harmony, cherishing each other wholeheartedly and with perfect fidelity.”  
– Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*.

While anyone who is sincere in living and walking as a child of God seeks to live according to God’s teachings (praying that *“thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”*) we live in the recognition that we are “by nature sinful and unclean,” that we are children of a fallen humanity who do not love God with our whole heart nor our neighbours as ourselves. This is true about those who enter holy matrimony; each is sincere in pledging their love and fidelity to the other for as long as they both shall live, but *“because of sin, our age-old rebellion, the gladness of*

*marriage can be overcast and the gift of the family can become a burden*” (ELW Marriage Service). Divorce is not the will of God, who desires that all people – including married couples – may enjoy the fullness of God’s loving and the abundance of God’s blessings for the whole of their lives. But Jesus is not singling out divorced persons as greater sinners than anyone else in the community, nor is he saying that they should be condemned or ostracized because their marriages did not last. Jesus is inviting us to return to God’s intention at creation and God’s Will for the people he has called together in the blessed community of God’s holy people:

- “Jesus isn’t speaking to individuals, you see, he’s making a statement about the kind of community we will be. In fact, he’s inviting us to imagine communities centered in and on real relationships; relationships, that is, founded on love and mutual dependence, fostered by respect and dignity, and pursued for the sake of the health of the community and protection of the vulnerable.” – Lose.

The importance of a community in which all persons are precious in the eyes of the Lord is made evident in the next episode in which *“people were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.”* (10:13). The disciples believe they are doing the right thing by attempting to enforce the standard social more in which children were not allowed to disturb a teacher and his students. Children had little status in society; they were often considered to be “non-persons” who did not enjoy the cherished place they have in modern, loving families. Paul reflects this societal understanding in Galatians, where he writes that *“my point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father”* (Galatians 4:1-2). This behavior shows that the disciples do not understand the point of Jesus’ ministry, which is inclusive, *not* exclusive. When Jesus sees what the disciples are doing, *“he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.’”* (10:14). Including the children also made it possible for the women who had responsibility for caring for them to hear Jesus’ teaching. After affirming that the reign of God belongs to children, Jesus warns his disciples that they must give up the normal human calculations of greatness if they want to participate in the rule of God: *“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”* (10:15). Like children, the disciples are radically dependent on God’s grace; they cannot set conditions for entering the kingdom. It is yet another reminder of the wideness of God’s mercy, that all people – men, women, and children; Jew and

Gentile; saint and sinner – are precious in the eyes of the Lord, that God so loved the *world*, not the world as God created it but the broken, rebellious world that time and time again had turned its back on God, but who God could not abandon because of God’s abiding love for God’s creation. God continues to bless us, abide with us, forgive us when we fail to live according to God’s expectations so that we might believe that our past failings do not mark us as failures, that the ways in which we may have not lived according to God’s Will does not mean that we are no longer children of God whose future is marked with trust and hope that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Holy Baptism God has set us free from all that would separate us from God and called us into a community made up of broken and sinful people who have been born anew through our baptism into Christ, in the sure and certain hope that *“if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”* (Romans 6:5). None of our past failings – including a failed marriage – should cause us to be separated from the community whose very purpose is to support us in our brokenness by the healing presence of the Lord who calls us into his church which is the body of Christ.

- “To be broken isn’t something to be ashamed of. Rather, to be broken is, in fact, to be human. And to be human is to be *loved by God and drawn together into relationship* with all others that God loves. Which means that our gatherings on Sundays are local gatherings of the broken and loved, of those who are hurting but also healing, of those who are lost but have also been found, of those that know their need and seek not simply to have those needs met but have realized that in helping meet the needs of others their own are met in turn.” – Lose.

When we are invited to a wedding, we are called to be not mere spectators but witnesses who pledge to love and support the married couple as they pledge their love and faithfulness to each other: *“Will all of you, by God’s grace, uphold and care for [this couple] in their life together?”* We are called as a community to support one another, pray for one another, and assure one another that they are members of a community that will support them as beloved children of God who desires all of God’s children to enjoy the fullness of God’s grace and the riches of God’s kingdom. We are grieved whenever a marriage we have witnessed does not survive, but we do not judge those who are divorced nor banish them from the community of God’s people. While the ties that bind two people together in marriage may not last, the ties that bind us to God and one another are made with *“cords that cannot be broken,”* and therefore we live in hope that because God continues to bless us with abundant

and ever-present support, “*we can be sustained in our weariness and have our joy restored.*” We may experience brokenness in human relationships, but we live in the blessed assurance that our Lord is the “*healer of our every ill,*” and that there is hope for healing and wholeness in the one who “*proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*” (Romans 5:8). We are gathered by our Lord who “*heals the broken-hearted, and binds up their wounds*” (Psalm 147:3), assuring us in our brokenness that we are bound together as children of God, and that nothing can separate us from the ties that bind us together as God’s children, those who are held and precious in God’s sight all the days of our lives.

Amen.