

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, October 3, 2021
19th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 27/Proper 22/Year B
First Reading: Genesis 2:18-24
Second Reading: Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12
Gospel Reading: Mark 10:2-16
Sermon Title: “The Virtue of Community”

Theme

Jesus announced and enacted in history the new reality of God’s surprising activity. These two stories demonstrate this new reality: Women and children are accepted and valued, not dismissed as inferior to adult men.

Text

²Some Pharisees came, and to test [Jesus] they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” ³He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” ⁴They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” ⁵But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

¹⁰Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

¹³People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, 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. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Sermon

Today's gospel connects two stories, one with an issue that makes many of us uncomfortable, and one that we all should find comforting, and I think that Jesus related the two deliberately.

Story 1 - Right from the outset, let me say that talking about divorce was not on Jesus' mind that day. He did not go to the region of Judea to teach on divorce. However, by the tenth chapter of Mark's Gospel, he was already being stalked by his enemies, namely in this passage, the Pharisees.

Allow me to remind you that the Pharisees are the most important sect of Judaism in the Bible because they are the spiritual fathers of modern Judaism. Their main distinguishing characteristic was a belief in an Oral Law that God gave to Moses at Sinai along with the Torah. The Torah, or Written Law, was akin to the U.S. Constitution in the sense that it set down a series of laws that were open to interpretation. The Pharisees believed that God also gave Moses the knowledge of what these laws meant and how they should be applied.

This matters because on this day according to Mark, the Pharisees came to test Jesus, and the issue they tried to test him on was an issue of the Law and Moses' interpretation of the Law. Mark called it a "test," but it was really *entrapment*. The Pharisees already knew the right answer to their question, in their opinion. The only real test was whether Jesus would agree with them or side with their enemies, the Sadducees. However, let us remember that the Sadducees and the Pharisees agreed on one issue, and that issue was that Jesus was messing up their deal. Both parties agreed that Jesus had to go, so if the Pharisees could get Jesus to mess up, that would please everyone.

²they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" ³He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" ⁴They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." ⁵But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' ⁷'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

The issue of their entrapment was divorce. *They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”* Knowing their high regard for Moses over God, ³*He answered them, “What did Moses command you?”* Jesus knew what they were going to say, but he was building toward his answer. ⁴*They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.”*

Now listen carefully to Jesus’ response; ⁵*But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”*

In other words, Moses wrote that divorce commandment to deal with a human situation born out of human sinfulness. God didn’t give that commandment. God’s commandment was that human beings are to live in committed community and that when they commit, they become one flesh, and an unbreakable bond is to be formed between the two. But we all know that this is yet another aspect of human life that we human beings have not been able to live up to. Jesus’ saying on divorce is another of his rejections of human legislation, this being the commandment of Moses, in favor of the original intent of God’s Law.

Now for you that have experienced divorce in your lives, quit squirming in your seats. The issue of divorce that the Pharisees brought to Jesus was just emblematic of the sinful human condition. You are not that special. The sin of divorce is not a greater sin than any other. There is no gradation of sin. The apostle Paul wrote,

Romans 3:23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Story 2 - Have you ever watched a papal visit and noticed that people will thrust their children in front of the Pope so that he will touch them, bless them? I suppose there is nothing wrong with this. People expect the holy man to bless their children and somehow his blessing will change the outcome of their children’s lives.

This is what was happening in the second story of our Gospel Reading, only the one who was being presented with children was Jesus Christ the Lord. So what is clear is that people who had come to some level of faith in Jesus believed that his touch alone upon their children would change their children's outcome. Being that most Jews were peasants in a land ruled by an occupying foreign army, we can understand how they would want better for their children.

However, Jesus' disciples "spoke sternly to them" and tried to turn them away. Mark wrote that Jesus was indignant over this and said,

"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Well, let us unpack that and try to see how these two stories might be related.

The Pharisees who were featured in the first story were the intellectuals. They had the benefit of the written word of the Law, which is pretty concrete. And then they had the benefit of interpretation of the Law, which is pretty convenient. They brought up the issue of divorce to trip up Jesus, but Jesus pointed out that their starting point – the commandment of Moses was the wrong starting point. Divorce was never part of God's plan for the human community.

In the second story, Jesus rebuked the disciples for chasing off the children as if they were mosquitos. Then he said something that must have been disappointing and astounding to hear. He said, ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God *as a little child will never enter it.*" The question we should be asking is, what does it mean to receive the kingdom of God as a child does? I mean, we really ought to be asking what this means.

I believe the answer is found in the connection between these two stories. The Pharisees were pretty full of themselves; they were cocky and self-assured. They thought they were smarter than Jesus. Believing that Jesus was not the messiah, they intended to entrap him, to prove to the world that he indeed was not the messiah and he does not have all the answers and therefore is a fraud and not worthy of anyone's devotion.

Jesus, fresh from their grilling, indicated that a life of faith leading to salvation is really not that difficult. Just believe in him. By the way, I'm aware that I'm not very good at children's messages. I have two early childhood specialists in my family who are only too willing to point out to me that I cannot use the *epistemology* in my messages to kids – but I digress. If I use language they can understand, children will *just believe* what I tell them. And if I tell them that God revealed in Jesus Christ, whom they will never see with their own eyes, loves them and cares for them and forgives them, they will believe it! Jesus is frustrated by the Pharisees who want to argue a very specific situation and won't listen to him because they already know the right answer in their opinion.

Jesus taught that God is loving and full of grace. Yes, God gave us the Law to govern our lives and the Law should be honored. We should always do our best. But when mistakes happen, we should feel drawn to God so that we can confess our shortcomings, and start anew while being held in his embrace of grace.

And we can trust Jesus on this, because as Paul wrote, ^{Hebrews 1:3} He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Friends, many adults grow up, get an education, and mature and then sometimes life and the decisions they've made disappoint them, and they lose faith. They no longer believe in Jesus Christ or his words of grace anymore. They don't often say this, but they blame the church or God revealed in Jesus Christ for their own failures. And then burdened with a lifetime of sin, the world breaks them down, and they give up. Searching for a fresh start, sometimes they believe all their problems will be resolved with a new spouse, but sin never leaves them, us – we can't help it, we are born into sin.

God intends that we live in community; spouse, family, neighbors, school, work, recreation. It's hard work because we're all sinners. But when we bring Christ into our relationships, the knowledge of his grace given to us while we were yet sinners and unloveable, helps to see each other in a different light - as ones valued and loved by God. And when we recognize that in ourselves and others, we begin to understand and appreciate "The Virtue of Community" that God intends for us.

There is no answer to the problem of the human condition of addiction to sin that can be found on earth. The only answer that satisfies and promises new life now and into eternal life in the future is Jesus Christ. It's not that difficult, ask a child.

Prayer

Merciful Triune God, you are the Divine Community, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and you created us live in loving community. Send your Holy Spirit into our hearts that we may be faithful and steadfast in all our relationships, and give us the faith of little children. We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen