

“What God Has Joined Together”

Mark 10:2-16

September 30, 2012

18th (19th) Sunday After Pentecost

The television shows that were around when I was a kid were always so enjoyable. One of the reasons for this is that the most complex family problems could always be solved in 22 minutes on *Father Knows Best* or *Leave It To Beaver*. We liked that. Television has changed a lot in the past 50 years, but some of our expectations have not. We still want quick and easy solutions to difficult and complex problems.

You’ve probably noticed that the Bible readings for the Sundays after Pentecost have addressed some very challenging issues which face Christians in our modern day world. Today is no different. In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus addresses the topic of divorce. This is a very sensitive issue and I approach it with much fear and trembling. I know there are those here who have been divorced. I would imagine there are those who are struggling in their marriages. I don’t want to add to anyone’s pain. On the other hand, we tend to approach Jesus’ difficult teachings with a “yeah, but..” attitude as we seek to justify our particular situation. That is not good either. Today, let us clear our minds of societal norms and personal presuppositions and simply hear Jesus’ words and the hope which they give us.

In our text, Pharisees were doing what many Christians do today: comparing behavior in “the real world” with the commands of God’s Word in order to determine what’s right and wrong. They phrase their question to Jesus in this way, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” In other words, what constitutes a legitimate divorce in the eyes of God?

There were two schools of rabbinic thought on this question which were popular at the time. Followers of Rabbi Hillel believed that a man could divorce his wife for nearly any reason. Followers of Rabbi Shammai believed that there were very few reasons in the eyes of God for which a man could divorce his wife.

Having this discussion might not be a bad thing except that our text reveals that the motives of the Pharisees were not pure. It says they were “testing” or “tempting” Jesus. As usual, they thought they could back Jesus into a corner and force him to choose between two wrong choices. Here, they thought, if Jesus followed Rabbi Hillel, they could accuse Him of being a liberal who didn’t take the Word of God on marriage seriously. If Jesus followed Rabbi Shammai, they could accuse Him of being too conservative and not being sensitive enough to people who really needed divorces. It was really just a game on their part to see how much they could get away with under God’s Law.

We like to play that same game – not only with regards to this commandment but with all of them. With regard to taking God’s name in vain, we want to know if we can use this word but not that word. With regard to honoring the Sabbath day, we want to know if we have to come to church every Sunday or if we can attend fewer times and still be cool with God. Do we have to always be obedient to those who have authority over us or can we ignore them if we don’t like what they say and still be okay with the 4th commandment? It all becomes a game of how much we can get away with and how we can justify our actions before God.

But Jesus refuses to play this game of “what constitutes a legal divorce?” Jesus says that divorce exists, not by God’s command, but because of people’s hardness of heart. (In other words, it’s because of sin.) Instead, Jesus replies with what constitutes a God-pleasing marriage.

First of all, Jesus says marriage is between a male and female, something which we could assume in a bygone era, but have to state clearly today. Secondly, marriage consists of a man and a woman uniting and becoming one flesh. Thirdly, the uniting of the man and the woman is done by God who joins them together.

When we consider this topic, this is where we should start as well. Marriage is a good thing, not a bad thing. In our Old Testament lesson, the Lord God said it was not good for the man to be alone. Therefore, God created Eve and brought her to be with him and that was good.

Marriage is God's thing, not ours. It is not a human institution based on human actions. It is a divine institution with God doing the action. "What God has joined together" are the words our Lord uses.

Perhaps, this is where our problems in marriage begin. There a problem in defining marriage which our society faces today. Humanity wants to make it merely a human institution and there are many problems that happen as we have seen.

There is also a problem with the carrying out of marriage. We want to be the ones who are doing the joining together. We either don't care about what God thinks or we think we know better. People today are uniting apart from marriage. Living together without marriage has become common place. It's not only against God's command, but it has proven to be a mess for many who have done it – unhappiness, conflict, and a higher divorce rate for those who eventually get married.

People today are also uniting apart from God even when they get married. In marriage, God joins two people together in Him. Yet many people today who want the marriage don't want God in it. They don't share or practice a common faith in Him. They think they can survive on feelings and mutual interests. Many times they can't.

So what is the solution to our marriage conundrum? It's certainly not the solution of the Pharisees: finding out under what circumstances a God-allowed divorce can take place. Rather, it is living in a God pleasing marriage. That seems so hard – nearly impossible – these days. Where can we find comfort when it's not so easy now? Where do find hope for troubled times in the future?

It's in Jesus' words, "What God has joined together...". God joins people together. He does not separate them. We are the ones who separate from each other and we do it because we are sinners. God takes sinners and joins them together. He doesn't do that in just in a half-hour wedding service or the basis of the fact that they love each other. God takes sinners and joins them together permanently on the basis of their Savior Jesus Christ who bled and died that they might have forgiveness from God and that they might give and receive forgiveness from each other. So, for

anyone considering marriage, let God do the joining together on the basis of a shared faith in Jesus Christ and an equal commitment to Him.

What God joins together, He keeps together. This is not a naïve wish, but a sure promise. It does not mean that Christian couples are free from conflict, arguing, fighting, and even the desire for divorce, but it means we have resources for dealing with these issues that other couples don't have who have not been joined together by God through faith in Jesus Christ.

We have Confession and Absolution where we have the opportunity to honestly and openly confess our sins to God and each other and to receive forgiveness from God which we can share with each other. We have God's Word to instruct us on how to properly love each other (including our spouses) and we have the gift of Jesus' body and blood in Holy Communion to give us personal forgiveness, to strengthen our union with Christ, and, by extension, to strengthen our union with each other.

What happens when divorce is brought up? Some of you remember actor Will Smith's declaration that, for him and his wife, Jada, the word "divorce" would never be mentioned during marital conflict. Instead, they would have to find a way to resolve their differences. (Sadly, it appears that even they have succumbed to divorce now.) Those who come to Jesus, looking for a lawful basis for divorce, will not find it. Jesus does not tell us how to have a proper divorce. He is saying not to divorce.

But Jesus doesn't leave us to fend for ourselves. He comes to us, speaking His Word of Law which condemns each of us and His word of Gospel which forgives us all our sins and failings, making us right with God and each other again. He does more than that. He gives us Himself that we might draw from the strength of our union with Him to strengthen our union with one another. When both partners in any relationship – wife and husband; parent and child; Christian and Christian – are both strongly committed to hearing the Word of God and receiving the Sacrament, there is forgiveness and power to overcome any conflict, no matter how strong it seems to be. Too often, I

see people who are experiencing marital problems start to drift away from Church. It's like a sick person who gradually starts to not take his medicine. You just want to shout, "Take your medicine!" For those whose marriages are in trouble and coming apart at the seams, I urge you to remember that we have the medicine for all sin and all conflict here. Don't stop taking it when you and your spouse are in conflict. ! Immerse yourself in it even more when conflict comes.

Yet divorce will still occur even among Christians. That is neither excuse nor rationalization. It is reality. We are all fallen sinful human beings and sin is what we do and who we are. Divorce is never the will of God, but no sin ever is. While society has treated divorce as a harmless solution to many problems, the Church has often treated divorce as the unforgiveable sin. It is neither. God does not want us to use it as a solution to marital problems, but, like when we fall short in any other area of life and sin, God does not reject us. He calls us to repentance over sin and invites us to trust in Jesus Christ for the full forgiveness of sin.

We do not live in a situation comedy. Complex problems cannot be solved in a short time. But God is not a short term God. He is with us for the long run. Jesus took the full punishment for all sins for all people when He died on the cross. He forgives you for every sin you've done, no matter how big and no matter how small. Jesus rose from the dead to give new life, not only in heaven in the future, but right here and now. Having been forgiven and restored by the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross, live in the new life given to you at baptism by His resurrection from the grave to life in whatever situation you find yourselves. There is always grace to forgive. There is always strength to overcome. His grace. His strength. For you and in you. Amen.