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**THE PHARISEES QUESTION ON DIVORCE AND JESUS WITH THE LITTLE CHILDREN**

**Sermon for the 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 2018**

**Mark 10:2-16**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Gospel from before Mark 10:2-16: <sup>2</sup> **Some Pharisees came to Him and asked Him, to test Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”**

<sup>3</sup> **He answered them by asking, “What has Moses commanded you?”**

<sup>4</sup> **They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and divorce her.”**

<sup>5</sup> **Jesus told them, “It was because your hearts were hard that he wrote this Commandment for you. <sup>6</sup> However, at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ <sup>7</sup> ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, <sup>8</sup> and the two will become one flesh.’ Therefore, they are no longer two but one flesh. <sup>9</sup> Therefore, no person should separate what God has joined together!”**

<sup>10</sup> **When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. <sup>11</sup> He answered them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. <sup>12</sup> If a wife divorces her husband and marries another man, she also commits adultery.”**

<sup>13</sup> **People were bringing little children to Jesus that He might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup> However, when Jesus saw this, He was indignant. He told them, “Allow the little children to come to Me and stop forbidding them! For the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>15</sup> Truly, I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child does will certainly not enter it.”**

<sup>16</sup> **He took the children in His arms, laid His hands on them and blessed them.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

It was not that long ago that people knew what the true definition of marriage is. In our Gospel today, Jesus tells us what almost every person once believed without question, that **at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ <sup>7</sup> ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, <sup>8</sup> and the two will become one flesh.’ Therefore, they are no longer two but one flesh.** It was accepted, even for those outside the church, that marriage was only between couples of the opposite sex. Today, however, people’s thinking on marriage has changed, and there is widespread support for same-sex couples to come together as one in marriage. And why not? If two people love each other, let them be wed! so they say. We know, however, that this is an absolute insult to God. And to add further insult, rather than warning such people that making a mockery of marriage is a sin deserving God’s eternal wrath and punishment, some churches today openly embrace these same-sex unions as being something absolutely wonderful, as if God would surely bless such ‘marriages.’

Marriage has also become something of a disposable - not much different than buying a car. We trade in cars for a new model when they don’t run as well as they used to. Today, many think of trading in marriage partners the same way. Because divorce is easily granted by the State, it is no problem for couples to divorce and remarry. Our own state of Queensland has the dubious title of the divorce capital of Australia, with around 30 couples ending their marriage each day.

Divorce can truly be tragic. The casual attitude that our culture has adopted toward the sacred institution of marriage is a scandal, and the sad fact is that divorce doesn’t just affect the couple who have decided to live together, but it also affects everyone who loves them. It especially affects the children. Children lose out on the stability of the life-long commitment that dad and mum have to each other. When a marriage breaks down, children often worry that they might be the cause of the break-up. When their parents get a divorce, children worry that dad or mum might not want them either.

Nevertheless, this is nothing new. Our Gospel today gives an account of Jesus commenting on the issue of divorce.

From the Gospel of Mark, we learn that the culture at that time was also trying to rationalise a permissive attitude toward divorce. <sup>2</sup> **Some Pharisees came to (Jesus) and asked Him, to test Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce**

his wife?"<sup>3</sup> He answered them by asking, "What has Moses commanded you?"<sup>4</sup> They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and divorce her."

When Jesus referred the Pharisees to Moses, they came up with a passage from Deuteronomy 24. This teaching on divorce reads as follows: <sup>1</sup> "If a man takes a wife and marries her, and then she becomes displeasing to him because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, <sup>2</sup> and if she leaves his home, goes away, and becomes another man's wife, <sup>3</sup> and the next husband hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the next husband, who has married her, dies, <sup>4</sup> then her former husband, who had divorced her, shall not dare to marry her again, after she has been touched by uncleanness! For the LORD regards that as detestable. You shall not pollute with sin the land that the LORD, your God, is giving to you as an inheritance!" (Deut. 24:1-4).

God's laws recognised that divorce could and did occur. Moses told priests, for example, that they must not marry women defiled by prostitution or divorced from their husbands.<sup>1</sup> Another time He permitted a priest's divorced daughter to go back to live in her father's house and eat the food her father received as payment for his service.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear, however, throughout the Old Testament, that the Lord wanted one man and one woman to stay married for life. "I hate divorce," He said (Malachi 2:16).

This law doesn't present a general divorce regulation. It addresses a very specific situation: If a woman is divorced by her husband, marries a second time, and her second marriage also ends in divorce or death, she can't rightfully remarry her first husband. When a husband handed his wife a divorce certificate, he surrendered his right to keep the dowry she'd brought to the marriage. He couldn't argue that his wife deserted him or that she went away only for an extended visit with her parents.

In this law God doesn't give divorce His approval or His blessing. Neither does God command divorce, even in circumstances when the other spouse has broken the marriage by adultery or desertion. God gave this law to protect a wife from financial hardship and injustice if her husband decided to divorce her for a trivial reason. By attaching strong regulations to divorce, and by prohibiting remarriage to the original spouse after an intervening marriage, this law surely discouraged divorce. It may have helped to prevent a first divorce, or it may have helped to sustain a second marriage. In the ancient Near East, divorce was almost exclusively the prerogative of a man. A law such as this discouraged the easy transfer of a woman from one man to another; consequently, it improved the status of women.

Moses' listeners must have understood what he meant by "some indecency" that a man could discover about his wife, and so he offered no further explanation. Was he referring to immodest exposure? Was it improper conduct? We don't know, but in Jesus' day there was a great debate over what indecency might justify the divorce. The legal opinion was that the indecency could be something as trivial as burning a meal or putting on too much weight. Today we have no fault divorce laws that do more or less the same thing.

These Pharisees had violated one of the basic rules for understanding Holy Scripture. Scripture interprets Scripture. Instead of debating among themselves what that passage in Deuteronomy meant, they should have looked elsewhere in the Books of Moses for clarification. Doing this, they would have found the passage that Jesus quoted from Genesis. Jesus said, **'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, <sup>8</sup> and the two will become one flesh.'** **Therefore, they are no longer two but one flesh. <sup>9</sup> Therefore, no person should separate what God has joined together!"** By quoting today's Old Testament reading from Genesis, Jesus was reminding His listeners of God's original plan. Marriage is not some kind of human arrangement, or the product of human progress, or social development. It is God's idea, His gift to His highest creatures. It follows, then, that people do not have the right to set their own standards for marriage, to determine their own rules for terminating it, or to devise alternative lifestyles to replace it.

There are many reasons that God holds marriage in such high regard and in so doing, condemns divorce. The Apostle Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5, spells out for us the blessed estate of marriage. There, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul reminds us that in marriage we see a picture of the communion between Christ

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 21:7

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 22:13

and His Bride, the Church.<sup>3</sup> These words remind us of the special proclamation that a Christian marriage makes as a Christian couple makes their way through this life together. This is an important reason to hold the estate of marriage in the highest esteem.

From this reading and the parallel readings in the other Gospel accounts, it is also very clear that Jesus teaches that marriage is the one flesh union of one and only male and one and only one female. There is no male-male or female-female. There is no polygamy, polyamory, or any other arrangement involving more than two people.

There is also another reason why marriage is so important to God. That reason comes from the second half of today's Gospel where Jesus once again expresses His love for children and scolds those who would prevent the little ones from coming to Him. Mark writes, **<sup>13</sup> People were bringing little children to Jesus that He might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup> However, when Jesus saw this, He was indignant. He told them, "Allow the little children to come to Me and stop forbidding them! For the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>15</sup> Truly, I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child does will certainly not enter it."** **<sup>16</sup> He took the children in His arms, laid His hands on them and blessed them.**

At first this might not seem to be related, but consider the command that God gave to Adam and Eve that is not included in today's Old Testament lesson. Genesis 1:28 reads, "*God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...'*" This is a clear indication that God created marriage to provide a safe, loving, and stable environment for the reproduction and nurturing of new life. God created marriage so that children could know that they are safe, loved, and cared for. When our culture tries to redefine marriage, it often forgets all about the children.

How is it that our culture can define any relationship between two people as a marriage when that relationship is not even biologically capable of producing children? What kind of misguided thought process could call an intimate relationship between two men or two women natural? How can our culture be so wrong?

This is the work of sin in this world. It is the goal of sin to take the most noble and most beautiful gifts of God and pervert them into something profane and ugly. It is the goal of sin to take the gifts that God has created for our highest good and pervert them into a tool to produce the greatest harm.

But God still loves the children. If you grew up in a loveless environment or if you know someone who grew up in a loveless environment, know that God wants to be your perfect father. In the prayer that the Lord taught us, He tells us to begin with the words, "*Our Father who art in heaven.*" With these words, Jesus teaches us that God is our true Father and He is our true brother.

And how did God bring us into His family? *God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us,* (Romans 5:8). God the Father sent His Son into the world to become one of us and take our place. God the Son took on human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Eight days after He was born, they named Him Jesus.

Jesus loved us enough to keep the Law perfectly in our place. He was totally faithful to God in every way. Then He took our filthy sin into Himself so that He could suffer all the painful results of the perversion that is our sin. He allowed mere men to beat Him and hang Him from a cross until He experienced death.

Finally, He conquered death and returned to life. He beat a pathway through death into life. Now He has ascended back to His Father and prepares a place for us. He has made it possible for us to be the children of God - children who are safe, loved, and cared for.

Jesus, the Son of God, sent the Holy Spirit to offer us the right to be the children of God. The Holy Spirit inspired John to write: "*To all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God,*" (1 John 1:12-13).

Through the work of Jesus Christ, God has reversed the damage of the great divorce - the divorce between God and His people. He has reversed the perversion of sin.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, God has extended the call to bring all people back into the family of God once again. He works faith in us and adopts us into His family. He sustains His family through His Word as we hear it preached, feel it in the water of Baptism, and taste it as Jesus Christ gives us His body and blood in, with, and under

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 5:22-33

the bread and wine of His Supper. In all these ways, God calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies us into His family. And it is in this family that we will live with Him as His children forever. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord God, heavenly Father, You are our shelter and strength. You are always ready to help us, and never leave us. We praise You for the great mercy You have shown to us sinners in the gift of Your Son Jesus Christ. We glorify Him because He has come to remove our sins by His sacrifice on the cross, so that whoever believes in Him may not die but have eternal life. We praise You, O Father, for Your great love to us, for rescuing us from the power of sin and death, and for opening to us the gate of heaven.

We confess that we are worthless sinners, guilty of flouting Your will more than we realise. We humbly repent of our evil, and trust for our forgiveness only in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Pardon us, and cleanse our lives for His sake. Grant that we may continue in Your kingdom as Your dear children.

Renew us by Your Spirit and teach us to love what is pure, holy, true, and good. Take captive our every thought, word, and deed, and make them obey Christ. Give us the desire to walk in Your ways, to follow Your Word, and to grow in it. Touch us with Your grace, that we may be transformed in character, firm in faith, joyful in hope, patient in troubles, and persistent in prayer. Fill our lives with the hope that Christ will transform our humble bodies and make them like His glorious body.

Fill Your Church with Your Spirit, that it may have a power and wisdom superior to all human knowledge. Give to all preachers and teachers the conviction and courage of true prophets, that Your people may be built up in faith and love, strengthened in service, and kept faithful to the end.

Spread Your truth and love among the nations, that they may receive Your truth in repentance and faith. Rescue them from error and godlessness, and move them to offer You true worship and praise. Bless our country. Help all to understand that personal advantage, public opinion, and party politics do not make a nation great, but obedience to Your will. Give us public servants and leaders in management and labour who are unselfish and far-sighted, and whose concern is for the public good and the God-given dignity of every person.

Be gracious to our homes. Give to all families the gifts of faith, love, and obedience to You, so that each home may be a first taste of the joy and blessedness of our heavenly home.

We pray you to heal and comfort all who face sickness, pain, hardship, suffering, or danger. Teach them to turn to You for help, and to trust in Your mercy. Give them hope and a joyous release from all their burdens.

These things we pray in the name of Jesus, our sure refuge and eternal hope. Amen.

#### 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 2:18-25

<sup>18</sup> The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I shall make him a helper, suitable for him."

<sup>19</sup> The LORD God had formed from the ground every beast of the field and every bird in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them. Whatever the man named each living creature, that became its name. <sup>20</sup> The man gave names to all the domestic animals, the birds in the sky and every wild animal. However, Adam did not find a helper who was suitable for him. <sup>21</sup> The LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep and, while the man was sleeping, He took out one of his ribs and closed its place with flesh. <sup>22</sup> Then the LORD God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman and brought her

to the man. <sup>23</sup> The man said: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She will be named 'woman,' because she has been taken from 'man.'" <sup>24</sup> Therefore, a man will leave his father and his mother. He will be united with his wife and they will become one flesh. <sup>25</sup> The man and his wife were both naked but were not ashamed.

Hebrews 2:1-18

<sup>1</sup> That is why we must pay closer attention to the things that we have heard, that we may not drift away. <sup>2</sup> For, if the Word that was spoken through angels was valid and every trespass and disobedience received a just penalty, <sup>3</sup> how shall we escape if we have neglected such a great salvation, which was proclaimed at first through the Lord and then was confirmed to us by those who heard Him? <sup>4</sup> God also added His testimony

to it by both miraculous signs and wonders, by different kinds of miracles and by distributing gifts of the Holy Spirit as He wished.

<sup>5</sup> For it is not to angels that He has subordinated the coming world, about which we are speaking. <sup>6</sup> However, somewhere someone has declared: “What is man that You are mindful of him or a son of man that You are concerned about him?” <sup>7</sup> You have made him lower than the angels for a short time and have crowned him with glory and honour. You have placed him in charge of what Your hands have made. <sup>8</sup> You have subordinated all things under His feet.” For, when God subordinated all things to Him, He left nothing that is not subordinated to Him.

At present, we do not yet see that all things have been made subordinate to him. <sup>9</sup> However, we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour because He suffered death, so that, by God’s grace, He might taste death for everyone. <sup>10</sup> For it was fitting for Him, because of whom all things exist and through whom all things exist, that, when He brought many sons to glory, He should make the Author of their salvation complete through sufferings. <sup>11</sup> For He who makes people holy and those who are made holy are all derived from one. That is why He is not ashamed to call them “brothers.”

<sup>12</sup> He says: “I shall proclaim Your Name to My brothers. Amid the congregation I shall sing Your praise.” <sup>13</sup> Again: “I shall trust in Him.” Again, He says, “Here am I, and the children whom God has given to Me.”

<sup>14</sup> Therefore, since the children have shared in blood and flesh, He also in just the same way participated in the same things, that, through His death, He might destroy the one who has power over death, that is, the Devil, <sup>15</sup> and that He might release all those who were subjected to slavery all their lives by fear of death. <sup>16</sup> For surely, He is not concerned with angels. Rather, He is concerned with the offspring of Abraham. <sup>17</sup> Therefore, He was obliged to be made like His brothers in every way, that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. <sup>18</sup> For, because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He can help others who are being tempted.

Mark 10:2-16

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