

Exodus 20:1-17  
Mark 10:2-16

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time  
October 4, 2009

## AN EARLY HEAVEN

"But from the beginning of creation God made them male and female. . . . Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." (*Mark 10:6, 14b*)

Our text this morning speaks to what we hold closest to our heart—our family and children. At the same time these are the relationships that can inflict the most pain when divorce ruptures family life. Yet after these hard teachings Jesus, characteristically, will *not* leave us without hope and a resurrected spirit. He leaves us with the startling grace of God, which refuses to add up the merits and demerits of life's conduct, but looks instead at the character of the heart.

What is the proper understanding of marriage, children, and divorce? I put the children in the middle because that's where Jesus puts them, at the heart of things. He's confronted by a parcel of Pharisees who are only interested in how they can trick him and win back their influence over the people. So they ask Jesus a question that they know has no good answer: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife." It was a longstanding contentious argument between rival factions of Pharisees who resort to planting nasty traps, like roadside bombs to take out an enemy. They're determined to kill Jesus, and they will. But right now, Jesus refuses to be suckered into taking sides. So he deflects their "legal" question, saying that Moses only gave them this law on divorce (Deut. 24:1-4) because of their "hardness of heart," literally, in Greek, their *cardiosclerosis*.

Jesus' concerns go far beyond what is "allowed" by their legalism. Jesus wants what God intended at creation. He says, "From the beginning of creation God made them male and female" (ref. to Gen. 1:26-27). *Male and female* who "shall become *one flesh*" (Gen. 2:24). "So they are *no longer two* but one flesh" (Mark 10:8). Not a hierarchy but a unity. Yet the Pharisee's religious law allowed for a *man* to dismiss his wife with a mere slip of hastily written paper that read, "I divorce you." She took no property with her, had no legal recourse, nothing. She was homeless, penniless, and unlikely to be taken in by even her own family because of the shame that was attached.

Now Jesus says a startling thing—if a man divorces his wife and remarries he commits adultery. Why?—so as to put more teeth into the promise making that gives integrity to the institution that is at the foundation of life. Then he says that a woman who divorces her husband commits adultery, though a woman could not initiate divorce in Judaism. Most likely, Mark, writing by tradition in Rome as a disciple of the apostle Peter, imagines Jesus speaking to a Roman gentile population where a woman did have that option. This was Mark's initial audience.

What, then, is going on in a marriage? When I meet with a couple in pre-marital counseling I have the couple create their own marriage service, including their vows, from a set of choices for each element of the service. I draw them from about ten Protestant services, Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian, etc. It gives the couple real ownership of the service, and it starts a conversation about the meaning and purpose of marriage, and poses the question—how do we actually become married? Most of the pieces are drawn from traditions that grow out of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's first Anglican prayer book of 1549. In the opening address, called the "charge to the congregation," we read that marriage is: reverence

*First:* "for the procreation of children, to be brought up [with reverence for] and [in the] nurture of the Lord." *Second:* "as a remedy against sin" so that Christ's body, the church, may be honored and preserved, through the physical union, in the integrity of its members. *Third,* "for the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity."

In short, each pledges to raise their children in the faith, to limit their own sexual conduct to each other, and to love, honor and cherish each other, for better, for worse. The couple becomes married by giving away the most sacred thing they have—their *promise*—to God, to each other, and to their children yet to be. Because a marriage is founded on a sacred covenant, a promise making that no human art can surpass, and because in creation God made us for each other “for better or worse,” Jesus, in sacred partnership with God, cannot speak of marriage as anything less than permanent. Life may face us with excruciating decisions because of our human weakness and outright sin. But can we *ask God* to renounce a promise once, one that we shared in together? Whoever would trust in a God who went back on a promise? And with what foolishness would any of us pledge to another: “And I promise to stay with you, my dearest, for as long as it seems like a good idea.” This is nothing to build two lives on. No! Our promise stands—even when we cannot keep it. And God’s promise stands.

But it does not bar the way. As Jesus says just a dozen verses hence, when the disciples lament, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus answers, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Meanwhile, the Pharisees who know the law, cannot yet grasp that law is always imperfect and interim. If you doubt that, look at the federal code’s exponential growth over 230 years. Something more lastingly, indeed infinite succeeds it.

Consider how we raise our children. We guide our children with homespun rules as they mature to adulthood. Hopefully, we supplement them eventually with a more mature set of ‘rules’ that are more universal in spirit, codes of conduct that are expressed in the gaps, so to speak, between the rules. Things like peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness and self-control. Later, when we have to cut the kite strings and let them fly on their own, we trust our children to know the rules yet operate by those higher principles. The new code does not displace the old so much as transcends them. *This is the realm of grace.*

We all know people like the Pharisees who never seem to break out of a legalistic mindset. People with sclerosis of the heart who cannot seem to see their way to a different way of being. We see gospels in people who cannot grant a hearing to a fresh way of picturing God, as through Jesus’ teachings. You may see it at work, or with some faculty, with public officials, in officious health care workers who assume for themselves the authority of their employers, and in scary drivers who see every pocket of space as a hole that needs to be darted into, an advantage to be gained.

Marriages can become like that. A constant maneuvering for advantage. A desire to win the point, at any cost. Then what? The next point, and the next.... Jesus will have none of it. And so he places at the heart of this hard counsel, not a another legalism, but a child.

Why a child? We are back to the first of our three reasons for marriage—to raise each fresh generation in the knowledge, love and reverence of the Lord. Not letting them find their own way, but leading them to discover the only way in the hope that they will wholly adopt God for themselves. Marriage and children are the gateway to the kingdom of God, which is precisely what Jesus says: “Unless you become as a child.” It has nothing to do with cuteness or charm, it has everything to do with utter dependence.

Remember our Old Testament responsive reading this morning? What was the fifth commandment, the most central, in a sense? That’s right, “Honor your father and mother,” because without that mutual honoring everything in society breaks down. And when the family does break down it is the children who are often most affected. I’ve talked with many parents over the years who have been deeply troubled by their children cohabiting rather than committing earlier to marriage. My response—it is so often that they are both scarred and scared by the prospect of their own marriage foundering, because they have seen such devastation within families among their peers.

Does God levy harsh punishment on those who divorce? No! I cannot imagine the God I know and love adding punitive damages to a relationship that has already suffered so much heartache and distress. The cross already took care of such things for all who seek to be faithful.

But when we get it right—even if it’s the second or third time, even fleetingly, it is, well, an early slice of heaven.

Amen