

Sermon – 10/03/21

Text – Mark 10:2-16

Theme – “What About Divorce?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus talks about marriage and He talks about divorce. These are important, hot-button topics to say the least. Not just now but then too. Marriage, with all its ups and downs, with all its joys and sorrows, with all its blessings and burdens always will be. It is one of the most vital, most basic, most important of all human relationships. But for us Christians, marriage goes deeper than just that. It is more than just a living arrangement, or a structure to rear children, or a building-block of society. For a Christian, marriage is also a way of confessing – and living out – the Christian faith.

In our text Jesus is approached by some Pharisees who have a question for Him. They ask: “*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?*” Now, as St. Mark points out for us, these Pharisees were less interested in what Jesus had to say than they were in getting Him to say something they could use against Him. Then, as now, divorce was a touchy subject. There were two main schools of thought among the Jews on divorce: one side claimed that since Moses had allowed divorce in the Law, a man could divorce his wife for ANY reason (one rabbi even said that merely displeasing her husband by burning his supper was sufficient grounds!); the other side was much more strict in their understanding of the proper reasons for divorce. So, these Pharisees who come to Jesus know that however He answers their loaded question, He will offend some people. It’s another of their “gotcha” questions, sort of like their question about whether a Jew should pay Roman taxes or not. But just like in that instance, Jesus turns the tables on His inquisitors. He asks **them** a question: “*What did Moses command you?*”

When the Pharisees say, truthfully enough, that Moses permitted a man to write out a certificate of divorce and send away a wife, Jesus then explains to them the “why” of it all. He brings them back to creation — back to Eden, where God made Eve out of Adam’s rib and brought her to him as his bride. God was the ultimate Match-Maker: He created the groom and the bride, He brought them together, He married them and made them “one flesh” as Genesis says. That union, that oneness, that completeness is God’s intention. And, Jesus points out, it is also intended to endure: “*What God has joined together, let man not separate*”.

But so many marriages ARE separated by people: that is, they end in divorce. So many husbands and wives live in antagonistic roles, trying to get the advantage over the other. So much sadness, so much pain, so much anger and bitterness in what ought to be the happiest and best relationship on earth. Even the best of marriages seem to go through periods where things are not the most pleasant, where the happy home becomes a battlefield. And not just among marriages in general, but even among Christians. Why is that?

The simple answer, of course, is because of sin. Adam and Eve, while in the perfect marriage of Eden, chose sin over obedience and love to God. They chose to do the one thing that God had told them NOT to do. They chose to abandon the place and role that God had given them (the highest, most exalted place on earth: that of being God’s agents and representatives to this earthly creation), they left all that in their desire to “*be like God*”. And that sin destroyed the perfection of creation, it destroyed the perfection of their marriage, it destroyed their perfect love for one another, it destroyed their own perfection. And it also destroyed the perfection of their unborn children – including you and me.

Because of their sin, you and I are born sinful and unclean, and we live lives which show that. Our sinfulness is quite clear, evidenced by what we think and say and do. The perfect joys of Eden, the perfect marriage of Adam and Eve, the perfect love toward God – all was lost when Adam and Eve

sinned, when they listened to that slippery, slithering, Satanic serpent instead of God. The verses which follow our Old Testament lesson tell us that painful story so very well.

But we also remember the great promise God made to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15, the promise to send a Savior who would set all things right again. That promise has been kept and fulfilled for Adam and Eve — and for us — in Jesus Christ. He has come to restore the perfection destroyed and lost so long ago – and that includes the perfection of that marriage in Eden. It was to restore that lost perfection that He was born into our flesh and blood. It was to restore that lost perfection that He lived the obedient life under the Law and commandments in our place. It was to restore that lost perfection that He died the death of the cross, paying for all sin. It was to restore that lost perfection that He rose again on Easter morning, proving that the victory has been won and Satan's head crushed. Jesus has done everything to undo what Adam and Satan did so long ago to destroy and ruin that perfection by that sin — the sin which we inherit.

As those who have been baptized into Christ Jesus we are forgiven and restored to God's family once again, His blood has washed us clean. We have His perfection and righteousness covering us, making us righteous and holy. So, why is it then that we continue to have problems and conflicts within our relationships, even our marriages? Why is it that even Christians have doubts and fears and moments of trepidation? Shouldn't all that leave us, since we are now in Christ, restored again to what had been lost in Eden's sin?

Well, we all know the answer to such questions, don't we? Yes, we **HAVE** been forgiven all of our sin in Jesus, but in this life-time we are not yet completely freed of sin or its grip upon us. Even Christians sin. And so there is no guarantee that we won't sin in our marriages – in fact, I can guarantee that we **WILL** sin in them. But that doesn't mean that we give up and let bad things happen, does it? It doesn't mean that we give up on marriage. It doesn't mean that we give up our efforts at being good

husbands and wives. No, as reborn saints we want to avoid and stop any sin that may pop up in our lives, including within our marriages. And so we go to God's Word for encouragement, direction, and strength. (pause)

One of the most revealing things in all of Scripture is the way that God, over and over again, uses marriage to describe the relationship between Himself and His Church. In the Old Testament God calls Israel His Bride. In the New Testament John the Baptist calls Jesus "*the Bridegroom*". St. John tells us in his Revelation that heaven is the eternal wedding banquet for the Lamb and His Bride, the Church. And, perhaps most striking – and controversial – of all, St. Paul reminds wives to be subject to their husbands just as the Church submits to Christ, and then he tells the husbands that they are to love their wives just as Christ loved and gave Himself for the Church, and then he quotes from our Old Testament lesson, saying: "*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one*" and adds "*This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the Church...*".

Too often, though, we read those passages and we get the message backwards: it is not that God's love is *like* a husband's love for his wife, but rather that a husband's love ought to be like God's love! That is, earthly marriage is only a picture, a reflection, of God's love – and **not** the other way around. His love for us is the original; the husband's but a faint/faulty copy.

As St. Paul has written, wives ought to strive to obey and love their husbands just as the Church strives to obey and love Christ – a heavy load indeed. But even heavier, even more impossible is the command given to husbands: your love for your wife is to be just as complete, just as sacrificial, just as perfect as the love Christ showed for us in His suffering and death! What a model for both Christian men and women to follow!

So, wives, are you able to say that you have had that TOTAL love and honor for your husband that the Church has for Jesus? And husbands, can you honestly say that you have loved your wives enough to sacrifice yourselves for them? Have you put their wants, their needs, their desires ahead of your own? Remember how Jesus gave everything, suffered everything (even hell!) for His Bride – have you husbands even tried to follow in His steps? (pause)

Now maybe we begin to see why even Christians have hard times in marriage, why instead of perfect love and harmony there is so often fighting and anger. Husbands and wives, you have been joined into one flesh – the very same description that Paul uses for the relationship between Christ and the baptized believer. You have been joined to Christ at baptism – that is not just some flowery, picture-language but it is a statement of fact. As Christians, we are one body — the very body of Christ. And it is that unity which makes us acceptable to God, which makes us His children and He our Father.

Husbands and wives, you are one flesh, one body. You are united (not independent) people, no more than are Christians independent of Christ. When you remember that, when you remember that your marriage is to be a reflection of the marriage of the Lamb and His Bride, then you have the guide and pattern to follow. Then you have the motivation to live as one, just as Christians strive to live as one with Jesus. And when you fail, when you sin — whether it be as husbands or wives, or as Christians in general — remember that we are also one flesh with Christ and so we do have forgiveness. We confess our sin, we repent of our sin, we ask for strength for the future, and then we move on, trusting that because we are in Christ, we have all that, just as He has promised. (pause)

And what about divorce? Is it ever allowed for Christians? Well, listen again to what Jesus said in our text: *“It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law”*. We need to be very clear that God’s intention for marriage is that it be lifelong – as Jesus said: *“...what God has joined together, let man not separate”*. But at the same time the Bible DOES give two acceptable grounds for

divorce: infidelity and desertion. The reason these two found sufficient grounds for divorce is because in both cases the marriage has really already been ended: in the first instance by one spouse rejecting the other and joining himself with another person; in the second case, by one spouse physically abandoning the other. Remembering that our marriages reflect the relationship between Christ and the Church, we see that if one is unfaithful to Christ (and goes after other gods, whatever those may be), or if one deserts Him, then one is not really a Christian anymore. Likewise, if one is unfaithful to his spouse, or deserts her spouse, the marriage has already ended and so divorce is simply recognition of that fact.

Divorce, though, is always the result of sin. It is not God's intention or desire that marriages end that way. As Christians we are to forgive, just as we have been forgiven by Christ. That means husbands forgive their wives (and wives forgive their husbands) when they sin against each other. Yes, it is hard – oftentimes even harder – to forgive someone so close to us when they hurt us and sin against us. But that is the way of the cross for us Christians. Just think of how many times you have hurt Christ with your sins, and then recall how He willingly went through death and hell for you anyway. When you focus on Him, and His love and forgiveness to you, then you will find that you can – and you will – forgive one another. Because so has your Lord forgiven you. And it is in that forgiveness that we live. Especially in our marriages. Amen.

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

OS — Nicene Creed (p. 158)

FE — Offertory