

*Lectionary 27*

October 7, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Dawn Alitz

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 10: 2-16)

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

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

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

The Gospel of the Lord.

So I know I have been with you once before, I think a summer or two ago. And typically I love coming to visit congregations to get the opportunity to be in a pulpit again. I was a parish pastor for many years before I went to Luther Seminary. And I love to share my love for these scriptures. But sometimes, when you're with a new group of people, texts are hard. This is one of those days.

Almost all of the texts today, as you dig into them, have minefields of meaning and subtext that various people have already picked up on. And one of the commentators that I was looking at this week said, "Know that your people will have already preached the sermon to themselves before you even begin." So I ask you today, that if your heart is closed or guarded, that you might open it up a little bit – I'll help you, I hope – so that we can hear one another.

One of my favorite seminary professors once taught me that when we read scripture we don't read scripture as the bible so we can bang somebody else on the head, or so that we can hold it in front of them saying, "You need to do this." But we read scripture side by side, as brothers and sisters, holding one accountable to the word and to each other in love.

And so I want to say, as an early disclaimer, that's how I come before you today. So if you hear it a different way, let's talk after the service. All right. That's the disclaimer at the beginning.

Now let's get into the theme for the day. So to begin with, I want you to do a little bit of imagining. You can close your eyes if you want to. But I want you to think of someone in your life who has had a deep passion for something that they shared with you. Maybe you have a deep tradition of cooking in your family, and you have memories of a grandmother, an aunt, or grandfather and uncle, who would get in the kitchen, and just the smell is familiar, and their love for the food and how everything tasted, was so permeable through the whole household, you remember that love. Or maybe you were like me and you had a music professor that was so overjoyed on how things flowed together, I couldn't help but catch that music bug early on. Or maybe, like me and my father, we had a farmer who would walk through the fields and would touch the leaves of the plants, to show how the earth was doing. So I want you to get that picture when you put that person in your mind for just a second. I am hoping that you all have one.

Now that you have that picture, now we're ready to enter the text. And I'm going to start in Genesis today, because here God is creating man, lovingly creating him out of soil. Just imagine someone who had been creating the earth and sky, but now God is getting down to the very, very details, and is using his hands and doing the details of the eyes, and creation. And finally God breaths life into this being. Right? How passionate and creative and joyful this process is.

And as God sees this, he realizes that this new being of joy and creativity is all by himself. He has no one to be with. And this is really important to God. And the clue actually comes in a slightly earlier text in Genesis, when we get at the height of creation. God says, "*Let us create human kind in our image, according to our likeness.*" And that's one of the first texts. Notice that it's not singular. It's not, "Let me make man in my image." It's us and ours. That's the first clue that we get into this Trinity that we play around with as Christians. Right? That God is somehow three in one, that these three beings come together, that there are neutrality in their love and support and their work together. They are so intertwined we can hardly see where one stops and the other starts.

And so can we see when God creates man and sees man all by himself, how hurtful that might be? You can't experience this depth of a relationship that I have in my entire being, and I cannot pass on to you this most important part of me. And so God goes about thinking about a companion, and creates all sorts of beings. And God watches carefully as the man names and watches them all march by. But he sees no recognition of the man for these creatures that would be the same. And so God goes ahead and creates woman.

As the story goes, Adam falls asleep. God pulls out a rib and creates woman, and joins the two of them together, just as God, Holy Spirit, and Redeemer are together, Jesus Christ. So keep that. That is the purpose. That is how we were created.

Now we're going to fast-forward a couple thousand years to the time of Moses. Moses had crossed the Red Sea with the Israelites, and now they are working on establishing the laws of a new community. They are in great detail in Deuteronomy. Many of you probably have not made your way completely through that text. But in that text there are some things about marriage. And I'm going to go into this text because it is actually in the Gospel text, too.

So in Deuteronomy, Chapter 24, the text reads:

*"Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife."*

How different is that language than the language of creation. Gone is the love. Gone is the mutuality. Gone is the idea of companionship. Gone is the creativity of being together.

The purpose of marriage, as stated in Deuteronomy and the law books, appears to be about pleasing the husband, and if that does not happen he is free to dismiss his wife and put her out on the street. And in those times, more so maybe even than now, that meant economic ruin and a very precarious social standing. We have changed the purpose.

So now we're going to move ahead another fifteen hundred years. Jesus and the Pharisees are speaking of our Gospel text for today. *"And some Pharisees came and tested Jesus."* They are trying to divide. *"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"* And Jesus says, *"What did Moses command you?"* They said *"Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."* And Jesus says, *"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law. But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become flesh, and they are no longer two, but one flesh."* They are no longer two, but one.

And so when they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. And he said, *"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."* Jesus has finally given some agency to the female, which was not in the previous law

But still not true to purpose. Still not true to reason. And, frankly, this is where we are stuck as humans. We, who were created with the hope of mutuality, creativity, and goodness, have failed. And not just those who have gone through divorce, but all of us at some level have looked at someone in our family, our workplace, the media, and have refused to see that person as a beloved child of God, entrusted to our mutual care. And

those closest to us we have difficulty seeing as given to us as one. We want to find reasons, binding reasons, even sometimes laws, to separate us in various ways. And please hear me. Many of these laws are important for the safety and well being of the community. I completely see that. I would not support people staying married when there is no mutuality, safety, joy, or creativity. But we have to be just as clear that, because it is necessary, it doesn't mean that we are somehow innocent of falling short. When we break a relationship, especially one that we have asked God to enter into with us — and I'm thinking specifically today of the text of marriage and baptism — we have missed the opportunity to engage in the beauty of life that God intended for us. That very passion we were created out of and the very peace he wanted for us to have.

So what are we to do with this difficult text? Well, we're going to go into the last part of today's Gospel, because that is where it gives me hope.

People were bringing the little children to Jesus to place his hands on them. People were trying to keep those children away. And remember these are children running around. They are probably not nicely dressed. They are probably not necessarily well behaved. They are wandering all over, and being loud, as children typically are. They are probably dirty, running around in the field. And they come to him. And Jesus takes their dirty, sweaty, noisy, wobble , wiggly bodies and hugs them close to him, and says. "*These are my children.*" And that's what God does with us all the time. Even when we fail, Jesus calls us back to God. When we fail with each other, we are called back to God.

As Jesus was preparing the disciples for his death on the cross, he promised to send the Holy Spirit to bring them back together. He gave them the bread and the wine for the forgiveness of sins so they could come back. And on the very cross, Jesus forgives those who condemned him because they – we – don't realize what we do when we hurt one another. And when he rises from the dead, Jesus forgives Peter – the one who denied him – and tells him to feed his sheep. Come back. Come back. Try again. Come back to the table.

So we may have forgotten why we were created, but God has not. And maybe that's why, on this day when there are so many other things that you could be doing, you have found your way here. Here, there are a bunch of broken people who want to be reminded, once again, why we are here and what we are meant to be, and who we belong to. We will share our hurts, we will share the bread and wine, and we will hear the words we so desperately need to hear: "You are forgiven. You are mine. Come back."

Thanks be to God!