

Pentecost 19-October 3, 2021

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Genesis 2:18-24 and Mark 10:2-16

“Receiving the Kingdom...As a Child”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

I really liked the insight of the author for the prayer of the day today who wrote, “Our Lord Jesus, you have endured the doubts and foolish questions of every generation. Forgive us for trying to be judge over you and grant us the confident faith to acknowledge you as Lord.

When the Pharisees came to Jesus, he knew what was in their hearts. He expected a foolish question. They didn’t bring a question to Jesus that might increase their faith. Instead, they wanted to judge his knowledge of the law concerning the matter of the divorce. Why did they pick a question about divorce? Well, this was the subject that put Jesus’ friend, relative, and forerunner, John the Baptist to death. Since the Pharisee’s were now threatened by the popularity of Jesus and the authority with which he spoke, they thought if Jesus gave an answer they didn’t like, the same thing that happened to John the Baptist, might also happen to Jesus.

Jesus was wise to the plot of the Pharisees and instead of giving the Pharisees an answer, Jesus asked them a question. Jesus asked them, “What does Moses command you?” Jesus didn’t ask them what God had intended. He didn’t ask them what the 6th commandment was on the second table that God had written and given to Moses. They had asked Jesus about the lawfulness of divorce, so Jesus asked them what Moses had to say about laws concerning divorce.

*The Pharisees likely had this passage from scripture memorized. We can find their response in the 24th Chapter of Deuteronomy which reads, **1 Suppose a man enters 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 2 and goes off to become another man’s wife. 3 Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); 4 her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife.** The Pharisees found their response in God’s word. They didn’t pull it out of the blue sky. They answered the question about the legality of divorce. There were some good intentions with this certificate of divorce or letter of dismissal as it is also called. It was to offer some protection for the woman so that she could remarry again and be financially cared for again. But this letter of dismissal on the other hand didn’t give a great deal of protection either. In the first place it was only the man who could write this letter of dismissal. Secondly, the grounds for divorce were broad since all the man had to do is find **something objectionable**. It was my understanding that if you didn’t like how she cooked she could be dismissed and if her second husband didn’t like her cooking any better than the first husband, he could do the same and the first husband was not permitted to take her back even if he remarried and discovered his new wife’s cooking wasn’t any better.*

The Pharisee's had answered correctly, "legally". Jesus then turns the pages of time and scripture back further from when Moses provided this easy means of ending a marriage. Instead, Jesus goes way back to when God created man and woman. Jesus tells the Pharisees about the blessing that God gives in marriage and how no one is to separate what God had joined together. Jesus then turns to the next chapter following the creation story of when sin entered the world and the first attack that Satan took was to separate not only the relationship between man and woman, but also between a couple and God who had created and blessed them. Jesus responded to the Pharisees that it was because of sin and their hardness of heart that a commandment was written about divorce. It wasn't written to make it legal and easy for husbands to move a better cook into the house.

Then came more questions, but this time the questions came from Jesus' disciples. The questions likely were foolish as well since the disciples didn't ask the questions in public. Instead, they waited until they were away from the crowd and in a house. I don't think Jesus gave the confused disciples much clarity on the matter of divorce when he spoke to them privately. Instead of Jesus explaining to the disciples how you can get off the hook of marriage by a certificate of divorce as described in Deuteronomy, Jesus holds both man and woman accountable and tells the disciples how the 6th commandment dealing with adultery is broken. The commandment was given by God to preserve the estate of marriage, not to give a legal way out.

I wish there would be a description of what the faces of the disciples now looked like after they heard from the Pharisees how to get out of marriage easily and then from Jesus how marriage was not established by God to get out of easily. Scripture doesn't record any follow up foolish questions from the now thoroughly confused disciples. Instead, the disciples do something more foolish. Jesus, who had just told them (and we heard what Jesus said last week) that whoever puts a stumbling block before children should have a millstone hung around their head and thrown into the sea. So, what do the disciples do? They spoke sternly to children who were coming to see Jesus and tried to stop them. Once again, we give thanks that Jesus endures our foolish questions and actions.

Jesus seems to drop the discussion on divorce and with a sloppy segway starts talking about receiving the kingdom of God as a child. Or does Jesus drop the discussion on divorce? Maybe having a message about children is instead perfect timing. Jesus delivers the only solution to legal matters such as divorce AND marriage. And he does so not by looking back and what is legal according to the law. Jesus picks up the children in his arms and blesses them.

Jesus doesn't use children because they are better examples of keepers of rules than adults. Children rebel against rules just as much as adults. Children however receive blessings without questioning if they deserve them or not or attempting to justify themselves by what they have done better than someone else. Children simply receive the kingdom of God without even thinking they must offer something in exchange for it.

Today's reading focuses on divorce and marriage. But a marriage license or a proper certificate of divorce will not gain one or the other easier access to the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is open for all God's children who believe they are his children and have been taken into his arms and blessed by him. Amen