

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

³ *“What did Moses command you?” he replied.*

⁴ *They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.”*

⁵ *“It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied. ⁶ “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, ⁸ and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”*

¹⁰ *When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. ¹¹ He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. ¹² And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.”*

¹³ *People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵ I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶ And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them. (Mark 10:2-16)*

God Designed Families

Many years ago I read an editorial in our synod’s old magazine, *The Northwestern Lutheran*. The point of the article was how different we WELS people are from society at large. It pointed to the almost fifty percent divorce rate that existed in our country already at that time and stated that the divorce in the WELS was a tiny fraction of that. Now, I haven’t read any recent statistics, but I doubt very much that the divorce rate in the WELS or here at Peace is any different from that of society in general. Should that bother us? Are we doing something wrong? The truth is, the issue goes beyond just whether our marriages are surviving. Marriage is the core institution that God built the family around. When we look at the whole family, we see a truth here in our gospel lesson that all of us would do well to remember and to apply to our everyday lives: **God designed families.**

I.

That means that God knows how they are supposed to work. Last winter, my wife and I bought a new minivan. Unlike every other car we’ve ever bought, it did not come with a manual. It came with a whole stack of them. Guess what? I haven’t read them. And some day, that might become a problem because my wife and I will probably get the most life out of that car if we use it the way it was designed. All of us will definitely get more blessings out of our families if we understand God’s design and follow it in our day to day lives. **God designed families. He built them around a committed marriage.**

In the reading, Jesus’ enemies asked him a question: **“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”** There was a dispute about this issue among the Jewish rabbis. But the Pharisees really weren’t looking for Jesus’ contribution to the discussion. They figured that no matter how he answered, someone would be unhappy and he would lose their support. But Jesus bypassed their entire debate and went back to God’s purpose in establishing marriage. The law of Moses does make provision for divorce. But Jesus said, **“It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law.”** In other words, it is only because sin gets in the way of the gift that God gave us that God makes any provision for divorce at all.

God established marriage at creation. Jesus quoted what God said in Genesis, **“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”** Lest we miss the point, Jesus said, **“Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”** When we get married, God makes us one with our spouse. He joins us into the most intimate relationship that we can have on this side of heaven. So God never wants to see a divorce. In the Old Testament, God even said, “I hate divorce.” Now, sadly the human heart is hard, so God does allow divorce under certain circumstances. If I am unfaithful to my wife, she has the right to get a divorce – I don’t, but she does. If I pack up and move out, she has the right to get a divorce. If I abandon her in some way but just live under the same roof – maybe by denying her intimacy or by abusing her or by being such a slave to drugs or alcohol that I have checked out of

the marriage completely, she has a right to get a divorce. But all those things are really just recognizing that I have already left the marriage. So if there has been a divorce, always there has been a sin. Either someone has cheated or someone has left or the divorce itself was a sin.

Why is that the case? Because marriage is one of the richest blessings God gives us in this life. A man and a woman join their lives together and promise to put each other first for as long as they both shall live. That commitment is greater than sex. It's longer lasting than raising children. It puts someone on our side day after hard and painful day in this life. So God does not use the word "love" in this reading. He doesn't focus on romantic, "happily ever after" feelings. He focuses on commitment. When we stand before the Lord and publicly declare our intention to forsake all others and be faithful to this man or this woman for as long as we both shall live, God joins us together.

For that reason, our Lutheran forefathers said, "Consent makes the marriage." Even if I don't feel terribly loving today, even if I don't earn my wife's love today, the commitment we made still stands in the eyes of God. So we practice another, higher form of love alongside romantic love, which should be a part of marriage. We work for each other's good. We build each other up and protect each other and serve each other and forgive each other every day of our lives together. That commitment is the heart of the entire Christian family. From it flows more blessings than I can possibly list today.

But what about those of us who are already divorced? Obviously, if you follow what I said before, some sin took place, maybe committed by your spouse, maybe by you. Hopefully, you have long since recognized whatever sins you committed in those situations and you have long since repented and been forgiven. Jesus died for divorced people, too. God's grace covers that sin as much as any other. But it is also true that when a marriage ends, the blessings that come with it end as well. So there are many people in our congregation who have joint custody of children or who are raising children alone or who have blended families with all kinds of complications – in some cases, very ugly complications. Don't misunderstand me. I do not in any way want to say those things are punishments from God. You are fully and freely forgiven. But when God's design for marriage cannot be followed, life is usually going to be more difficult. It's a lot harder for one person to raise children than for two. It's a lot harder to have someone outside the home who has a say, or thinks they have a say, in what's going on in your home.

But God is still God. He loves all his children. Even when we make our lives harder, even when there are natural consequences to the choices we make, even when the sin of our spouse hurts us and makes our life more difficult, God promises that he will never leave us or forsake us. God promises that he will hear our prayers and rescue us. God promises that he will work in all things to bring us home to heaven. That's true for all of us. We are all sinners. We all complicate our lives in thousands of ways that have nothing to do with marriage, and God still loves us and takes care of us here and then brings us home to heaven.

But what about those of us who are married right now? Is our relationship with that person we married the closest relationship we have in this life? I hope so. But I've been married for twenty-five years and I've been counseling married people as a pastor for just as long. So I know that sometimes we married people don't love and honor our spouse like that. Sometimes, we don't treat that person as the greatest gift God has given us on this side of heaven. Sometimes we take them for granted. Sometimes, we refuse to let go of things they did or said which hurt us. Sometimes, we look at other people's spouses and wish that we had that husband or that wife instead of the one God gave us. Even if those things never break our marriage, they're still sin because they go against the commitment we made. They pull against what God did when he made us one.

For all that sin, there is only one solution: Jesus our Savior. He was never married, but he honored marriage as God's institution. He died and he paid for all of us husbands and all of you wives who failed to love and honor the spouses God gave us. He wiped all that sin away. In his forgiveness he calls us to love and honor each other. He builds us up with his love to do just that.

II.

From the issue of marriage and family, Mark moves on to the issue of children. Now, did these two incidents really take place this close together? There's no way to tell. But God deliberately put them together because of the close relationship between them. He uses the children that Jesus blessed to teach us the key lesson about a Christian family: **God designed families. He built them around a childlike trust.**

People were bringing their children to Jesus to have him bless them. This incident is a little hard for us to understand because we live in a "family values" culture. Children are the center of our lives. Here at Peace,

we operate a school and some of our biggest boosters no longer have children at home. Some of them don't even have grandchildren in our school. But for us, the image of children learning about Jesus is warm and positive. That wasn't true in the same way in the ancient world. Maybe it was because half of all children died young. Maybe there were other cultural reasons. But in Jesus' society, men rarely dealt with children, especially with children who weren't their own. So when people were bringing children to Jesus, his disciples – none of whom probably had children at this time – tried to stop it. Jesus was too important to deal with their kids.

Of course, Jesus let the disciples know he wanted to bless those children. But in the process of explaining that, he said something timeless: **“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”** The kingdom of God belongs to people like those children that were being brought. What does that mean? Well, Jesus went on, **“I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”** The faith of a little child is the model that Jesus holds up to us adults. One of my privileges here at Peace is to lead chapel. Even when I'm talking to preschoolers – three and four year olds – I can ask them what Jesus did for them. And they don't doubt. They don't make it complicated. They say, “He died for me.” They know that means that they will go to heaven. We adults complicate it. We ask all kinds of questions and wrestle with all kinds of doubts. But a child hears the voice of his Savior and he knows it's true. That is the attitude that God calls all of us to have.

That attitude lies at the heart of family life. God calls us adults to do more than just let our children come to Jesus. He calls us to bring them. God calls all of us, children and adults, to hear his word and trust his love. In that faith, he builds our families. As we worship together, as we read our Bibles together at home, as we talk about our Savior and what he means to us, God not only builds our faith, he draws us closer to each other, because the closer we get to Jesus, the closer we are to our brothers and sisters in faith. Finally, the most important thing that I can do for my children or for my wife is build them up in the faith because that faith is going to carry us home to heaven.

I know that can make us feel a little guilty. We could all do better at building each other up in faith. I'm a pastor and I have to admit that as my children have gotten older and our family life has gotten more complicated and has had more demands placed on our time, it's harder to consistently do devotions at home. It's harder to focus teenagers and young adults on Jesus because they aren't little children anymore and they have more and more challenges to face. But Jesus took away all our failings in this area, too. He forgives us for not doing this as well as we should. And he works in every effort that we do make. He works in that gospel to give us and our children that childlike faith that lies at the heart of the Christian family and the Christian life. Trust him and apply that gospel to each other.

It's kind of nice that this is our lesson for today. I didn't plan it this way. This is the appointed gospel for today. But it's nice because in just a moment, we're going to install Mr. Schwartz to be our principal. Not only is he a fine example of a Christian husband and father, God has called him to teach the children of our congregation to know their Savior. God has called him to be an example of making childlike faith the heart of his family and his marriage. We want to ask God's blessings on him and his family. And we want to ask God to bless the work he does among us so that we all grow in that faith. God will hear and answer that prayer. Amen.