

# WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER

Mark 10:1-16

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

October 7, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 10, verses 1 through 16. It is on page 715 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 10, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them.

<sup>2</sup> And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" <sup>3</sup> He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" <sup>4</sup> They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." <sup>5</sup> And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. <sup>6</sup> But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' <sup>7</sup> 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, <sup>8</sup> and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. <sup>9</sup> What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

<sup>10</sup> And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. <sup>11</sup> And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, <sup>12</sup> and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

<sup>13</sup> And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup> But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. <sup>15</sup> Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." <sup>16</sup> And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

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

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In the heart of this text, Jesus teaches us about marriage, the distinction between male and female, and the problem of divorce. Now I don't need to tell you that the doctrines Jesus teaches here have fallen on hard times. You already know that. We look around and see that marriage is no more permanent than the paper it's written on, nor does it even require a husband and a wife anymore. And beyond that, we can't even agree on what the words male and female mean. We examine the changes our society has gone through, and it makes us long for "the good old days."

But "the good old days" might not really be as good as we think. Our nation has always had problems with divorce and adultery. This is nothing new. And from what we read in the gospel lesson, the Jews had issues with it too. This was two thousand years ago. Even in a highly

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moralistic society like Israel during the time of Jesus, they were really messed up on the issue of divorce. Even the Pharisees, who were the most moralistic of them all, they couldn't get it right. And their problem goes all the way back to the Exodus, around the year 1400 BC, when Moses had to give them laws to regulate divorce.

If you want to recover "the good old days," you might have to go back farther than you think. You'll have to go all the way back to the Garden of Eden, before the fall into sin. If you really want to fix all of society's problems concerning marriage, you'll have to figure out some way to uneat that cursed fruit, because that's where our hardness of heart comes from.

So the problem is impossible for us to fix—at least in any comprehensive way. But that doesn't mean right and wrong are irrelevant. Our hardness of heart is precisely why good teaching on this subject is necessary. And that's what Jesus gives us in this text. He sets the record straight on what is right and wrong. So we'll consider what Jesus teaches concerning marriage, divorce, and the distinction between male and female.

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But first we should notice the bigger picture. Jesus' teaching on marriage is one scene in a larger story. Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem and the cross. That's what the geography reference in verse 1 reminds us of. If you don't know the geography of ancient Israel, that's okay. Just know that Jesus is about to enter Judea and head toward Jerusalem to face his death. That's his purpose.

And the funny thing, in an ironic sort of way, is that Jesus opponents want the same thing. The Pharisees want Jesus dead. They just don't know that Jesus also wants the same thing. So the Pharisees are trying everything they can to trick Jesus into incriminating himself. They want Jesus to either teach false doctrine, so the people will turn on him, or they want him to say something that will tick off the Romans. Then maybe the Romans will do the dirty work of killing Jesus for them.

So they ask this question in order to test Jesus. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (10:2). They considered it to be a tricky question, even though it shouldn't have been. Like I said, they were really messed up on this issue. So they didn't really care what Jesus thought. They weren't asking Jesus to teach them. They just wanted Jesus to slip up, so they're throwing whatever controversial topics they can think of at him, hoping he'll slip up.

That's the bigger story of what's going on here. The Pharisees want Jesus dead, or at least discredited. And Jesus is willing to go to the death, but he's not willing to be discredited. If they're going to kill him, they'll have to kill an innocent man, because Jesus goes to offer himself as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. That's the bigger picture of what's going on here, and that is our only hope if the part that follows convicts us of sin.

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Now for the smaller picture.

The Pharisees ask about divorce, and Jesus throws the question back on them. He asks them what Moses commanded. And they answered that "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away" (10:4). Now this is only sort of true. The passage in question is Deuteronomy 24, verses 1 through 4. You can write that down and read it later. And if you read it carefully, you'll notice that Moses doesn't actually permit divorce. He simply acknowledges that it happens and sets some regulations for it. The point is to prevent a bad situation from getting worse. And Moses does this in two ways. First, he implies that in order for a divorce to

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be valid, there has to be a certificate of divorce. This protects the woman. If her husband becomes displeased with her and sends her away, she has a serious problem. She has no land and no house, and no other guy is going to marry her, because they consider her to still be married to the first guy. So, recognizing that hearts are hard, and some guys are going to send their wives away anyways, Moses commands them to write a certificate of divorce. That way, the woman at least has some proof that she's not married anymore, and she can marry someone else. The certificate was a matter of protection for the woman.

And the actual commandment Moses gave regarding divorce in Deuteronomy 24 is that once the woman goes and marries another man, the first husband cannot remarry her under any circumstances. Even if the second husband dies or divorces the wife, the first husband is the one guy who absolutely cannot marry her. And this protects the second marriage.

Suppose the first husband gets jealous. He realizes that the woman was his soulmate or just made really good meatloaf, and he wants her back. Moses' commandment protects the second marriage. The guy can't try to seduce his ex-wife back. And he can't bad mouth her to the new husband, hoping the new husband will then divorce her. And he can't just kill the new husband and take the woman back, although there were other laws that prohibited that course of action.

So Moses' commandments about divorce didn't make it okay. They simply regulated it. So we see that even in ancient Israel, the civil law was not in perfect harmony with God's moral law. People committed sins, and the laws about divorce were there to prevent bad situations from getting worse.

So Jesus said to the Pharisees, **"Because of your hardness of heart [Moses] wrote you this commandment"** (10:5). Then he appealed to the order of creation. He goes back to the time before the fall into sin, because that is where we have a clear picture of how God intends things to be. He quoted from Genesis 1:27, that **"God made them male and female"** (10:6), and Genesis 2:24, **"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh"** (10:7-8). Then Jesus added his commandment to it: **"What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate"** (10:9).

Here's the point: marriage is not something man does. It's not something that husband and wife make. And it's not something the state creates. Marriage is God's work. There is something more there than what first meets the eye. It's not just a contract. It's not just a physical union. It is a *spiritual* union, and God is the one who makes this happen. And this is the part that man cannot undo. You can separate, and you can go down to the courthouse and file some legal papers, but that only undoes it in the eyes of the state. The spiritual union God created is still there. Divorce doesn't dissolve a marriage; it just breaks it. It's still there, but it's broken. The biblical view of marriage is not simply that it *should be* permanent. The biblical view of marriage is that it *is* permanent. As long as both people are still alive, the marriage still exists.

This is why Jesus says that anyone who goes and marries another person after being divorced commits adultery.

Think about this with me. The word adultery, according to its normal usage, is when a married person has sexual relations with someone other than their spouse. Now sometimes, like in the case of the Sixth Commandment, the word adultery can refer to any kind of sexual sin, whether you're married or not. That's the broad definition. But in its normal usage, it refers to a married person having sexual relations with someone other than their spouse. And that's

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the way Jesus uses the word here. Anyone who marries another person after being divorced commits adultery, because the first marriage still exists. Divorce doesn't make it go away.

Now you might be thinking, *Well that means that if you get remarried, then you're really married to two people.* That's right, and now you see why this is such a mess. We're throwing God's creation way out of whack, because there are really two marriages where there should only be one. Now you shouldn't ever consider going back to that first marriage. Once one person has entered a second one, it's wrong to even consider going back to the first. That would just cause more brokenness.

Now, what's done is done. The point isn't to tear down people who already live with too much brokenness. But this should serve as a warning to not break what God has joined together.

Marriage is permanent, whether we like it or not. And there are two ways of looking at this. One is pessimistic. If you're in a marriage that has troubles, you might think, *I'm stuck.* But the optimistic way of looking at it is better. No matter how much trouble you're having, you are still one flesh; this is still a marriage God has created, and this is good. Even if everything else seems to be against your marriage, God is for it.

And I should state one caveat before we move on. If there's abuse, that is not God's will. You should do what is necessary to end the abuse. The marriage is still there, and you can separate without getting divorced, but don't let a bad situation become worse.

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Now Jesus' main concern in this passage is clearly divorce. That was the issue in their day. But in our day we have a couple more issues that Jesus may or may not have intended to address. But whether he intended to address these issues or not, he did, and it's very relevant for us today. The passages he quoted to set the record straight on divorce also set the record straight on gay marriage and gender identity. And these issues are obviously related.

Now I'm not going to argue for any civil policies. I'll leave that to the politicians. I'm just a theologian. So I'll stick to what is right and wrong morally, and how that dictates *our* behavior.

First, gender identity, because God created them male and female. Gender is not left up to our choice. The distinction between male and female was made at creation. There has always been and always will be only two sexes. Regardless of what a person may feel, the reality remains. This is clear, both in Scripture and in science. Even if a person takes certain drugs or undergoes a surgery, those changes can never be anything more than cosmetic. The DNA in every cell is still the same. Regardless of what we want to call a thing, it is what it is.

We've begun to believe the lie that what we feel is what is real. But that's not always true. In a fallen world, feelings do not always correspond to reality. And wanting to be something else does not mean we can be. If we fight against reality, we're only going to hurt ourselves and others.

Now there's one very important thing here that we all need to be clear on. Whenever we encounter someone who is not happy being the sex God made them, we need to treat them with compassion and respect. A human being is a human being. And feeling like you are the other sex is not always the fault of the person who feels that way. In fact, most of the time, it probably isn't. So can you be friends with someone who wants to be the other sex? Yes. In fact, if you have the opportunity, you probably should. And friends tell each other the truth in the kindest way possible. We want people to live in harmony with the sex God created them to be,

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not because we need everyone else to follow our rules, but because it's the only way to be at peace in God's creation. We insist on truth because it is good for us. This lie that we can choose our own gender actually causes people to mutilate their own bodies, often in ways that can't be undone, even when they want to later in life. This is very sad, and it requires a great deal of compassion. So on the issue of gender identity, remember truth, but also remember compassion.

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The second issue of our day which Jesus settles for us is gay marriage. Again we remember that marriage is something God does, and God created male and female for one another. So God joins husband and wife together in marriage.

Now this might make it sound like we are opposed to gay marriage, but that's not quite right. Scripture clearly teaches that homosexual *behavior* is sinful. But that isn't really why we resist same-sex *marriage*. We just don't believe it actually exists. Our position is not that marriage *should be* the union between male and female, but that it *is* the union between male and female. And if that's the case, then same-sex marriage isn't just wrong, it's not real.

Again, it's a matter of calling a thing what it is. The state can issue a piece of paper saying that any two people are married. They can also decree that clouds are marshmallows, but that doesn't make it true. The state may do one thing, but the Church cannot follow. We're dealing with different definitions of marriage. The Church is concerned with *God's* definition of marriage and the *spiritual* union that takes place.

So the reason we won't perform same-sex weddings isn't just because we don't think we should; it's because we recognize that we can't. It doesn't work. The spiritual union doesn't actually happen, so it would be a lie to stand at an altar and say that it does.

Again, we go back to the order of creation. That's where all of this comes from. So we shouldn't really call our position the "traditional view of marriage." By calling it traditional, it makes it sound like we just don't like change. Instead of calling it "traditional," we should call it what it really is, "*creational*." The Christian view of marriage isn't rooted in tradition. It's rooted in creation. And if it's rooted in creation, then it's rooted in something outside of ourselves. It's rooted in something far beyond us and completely outside of our control. It's rooted in how God designed this creation to function.

And above all, remember that this is another issue that requires both truth and compassion. It's not compassionate to say God will bless a marriage when it's not really a marriage, and it's not something God promises to bless. So we decline to perform same-sex marriages, and we speak the full truth concerning homosexual behavior: that it's a sin Jesus died for. And I hope you notice both sides of that statement. It's a sin, and Jesus died for it, just like every other sin, including divorce, harming our own bodies, or whatever our special sins are.

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So while we hear Jesus' words in the smaller scene. Remember that there's more going on, because if there isn't more going on, then we're all doomed, if not for these sins, then for others. Remember, the question the Pharisees ask about divorce is really about getting Jesus to the cross, where he offers himself as the sacrifice for these sins and all sin. Without this bigger story, we would all be left in our cursed sins.

We've dealt with some difficult issues in this sermon. Some of them might even hit close to home. And now we're turning our attention back to Jesus and his work on the cross. So this

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might be the part of the sermon where you expect me to say something that makes it all better. *Pastor, I'm divorced, or, I have thoughts about the same sex, or, I don't feel right in my own body. Tell me that it's really okay, because Jesus died for me.* I can't really do that, because the brokenness of this creation still exists. Jesus' death doesn't make you not divorced anymore. That reality still exists, and it's a painful reality. And it doesn't change our feelings and desires. We're still at war with ourselves.

When we live contrary to the way God intended this creation to function, we add more brokenness to an already broken world. And as long as we live in this broken world, we have to deal with the brokenness. Jesus' death does not make it possible to fight against the design of creation and be okay. So I can't tell you that Jesus' death makes everything all better, at least not in this broken creation.

What I can tell you is that your sins are forgiven, because that is what Jesus' death accomplishes. And I can tell you that all who trust in Jesus for forgiveness will be spared God's wrath, because that is what Jesus' death accomplishes. It doesn't mean everything will be okay in this fallen creation, but it does mean everything will be more than okay in the new creation, because that's what Jesus death and resurrection accomplishes.

Despite the brokenness we still experience in this life, know that God is not angry with you, and he has prepared an eternal home for you where our brokenness and sin cannot follow. This is where we place our hope, because this eternal hope cannot be taken from us, it cannot be corrupted by the sins of this life, and it will never end. This is what Jesus accomplished by his death and resurrection. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.