

ONE FLESH

Mark 10:2-16

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B; Proper 22)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 10, verses 2 through 16. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 10, beginning at verse 2, we read in Jesus' name.

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

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

¹³ And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." ¹⁶ 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.

This is going to be a sensitive one. There's no way around it. There's no way to talk about divorce without getting real and personal. Divorce has affected almost everyone in some way. Maybe you are divorced. Maybe your parents are divorced. Almost everyone has someone close to them who has experienced the pain of divorce.

I would be much more comfortable preaching about the sins you don't need to repent of. And I could tell you about a forgiveness that you don't really need, but if you ever do, it's available. So it's uncomfortable. That's unavoidable. But there is no better place to deal with this than at church, under the shadow of the cross. So we address it as forgiven children of God, who daily need, and daily receive, Jesus' forgiveness.

It's a sticky subject, and it has been for a long time. It was even a sticky subject when Jesus was asked about it nearly two thousand years ago. We might assume that since Israel was a very moralistic society, that they didn't have much of a problem with divorce. This is not true. Nobody knows any real statistics on the matter. I doubt it was quite as common as it is today, but divorce was not uncommon back then. This was a sticky question, and that's why the Pharisees

asked Jesus about it. They're not trying to learn from Jesus, they're trying to get him to say something scandalous. At this point in Jesus' ministry, he is on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. So every question the Pharisees ask Jesus is intended to trap him. And divorce was a sticky subject, even back then.

The thing with a moralistic religion is that you can't actually set the moral standards too high. If we have to obtain God's favor or earn some kind of blessing by our actions, you have to make the standard attainable, or no one will try. This might sound backward at first, but the only religion where you can have a perfect moral standard is in a religion of grace, because then it's not "game over" when you fail. And that's Christianity.

So the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus. And he turns the question back on them. **"What did Moses command you?"** (10:3). Now Moses wrote the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. And the Pharisees think of a passage in Deuteronomy (24:1-4) where Moses set regulations on divorce. And they assumed from the regulations that Moses meant divorce was okay. He did not. Moses set regulations on divorce, because the Israelites lived like everyone else around them. If you want proof of that, just open to any page in the Old Testament. It was a lot like the way Christians today live like the people around us. They weren't any different. Divorce was a reality, so God had to regulate it, but the Pharisees took this as permission.

But Jesus has a different passage in mind. He's not thinking of the one where Moses set regulations. Jesus is thinking of Genesis 1, where God created human beings male and female (1:27), and Genesis 2, where he instituted marriage (2:24). You see what Jesus is doing? He asks, **"What did Moses command you?"** They answer with a passage from Deuteronomy, and Jesus basically says, "No, no, not that one. *This* one." He wasn't dismissing the Deuteronomy passage. But they were misunderstanding it, and they were not recognizing the primacy of God's design. So he takes them back to creation. Jesus is not just pitting one passage against another. Jesus is appealing to the way he made marriage in the first place. If you really want to know how something should be, look at how it was before it broke. So the command of Moses that Jesus was talking about is from Genesis 2: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Then Jesus adds his divine commentary: **"What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate"** (10:9).

Jesus finally gets around to answering their initial question. Remember, they had asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" And what is Jesus' answer? "No."

This commandment, like so many other commandments of God, is based on doctrine. The doctrine of marriage reveals divorce to be unlawful, because marriage is God's work. That's what Jesus says. God has joined husband and wife together. Your marriage is not your creation. You probably stood at an altar and made some vows. But God is actually the one who joins husband and wife together. And we do not have the right to break apart what God has joined. And it's not really a question of whether or not we have the right to do it, but if we even have the ability to do it.

Too often we think of divorce as the dissolution of a marriage. But that's not right. Divorce does not make a marriage go away. It breaks it, but it does not go away. It's like a precious vase. But when you break it, you don't get to throw it away. You have to carry the broken pieces around with you every day. If you've experienced divorce, you probably know this far better than I can tell you. That's because marriage is two people becoming one flesh. So divorce is not as simple as separating two people. We're breaking one flesh.

ONE FLESH (Mark 10:2-16)

I suppose this could sound discouraging. Divorce creates a brokenness that doesn't go away. But it cannot separate you from the mercy and forgiveness of your Heavenly Father.

And this should really be an encouragement to those who are married. No matter how bad your marriage may seem, it's still the creation of God. He made it good, and he is faithful to what he created.

I'm convinced that no marriage is beyond repair. If you think I'm wrong, I invite you to prove it. Bring your husband or wife with you, and we'll talk about the biblical doctrine of marriage. We'll talk about three words: marriage, love, and forgiveness. We'll talk about the biblical definitions of those three words.

Jesus has already defined marriage for us. It is male and female joined together by God as one flesh.

As for love, God means something much deeper than romance. He means sacrifice and service. So love is not a feeling that mysteriously comes and goes. It is a conscious choice we make. If you don't love someone, that's your choice, and it's the wrong choice.

And forgiveness isn't getting over being hurt. It means bearing the cost for what someone else did. You can be hurt and still forgive.

Marriage is a challenge. Love and forgiveness are simple to define, but difficult to practice. You won't do them perfectly. But we learn these things from the way God has loved us and the way he has forgiven us. So let's talk about love and forgiveness.

One of the best things to understand in order to have a healthy marriage is the Christian doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Our Lutheran Confessions define justification this way:

People cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By his death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight. (AC IV)

That's the doctrine of justification. God declares you to be righteous because Jesus died and rose again for you. We could also call it the doctrine of forgiveness. Your Father in heaven forgives all your sin, because Jesus paid for it. Understanding this doctrine, not just with your mind, but also experiencing it in your heart, contributes to a healthy marriage. Why? Because it teaches us forgiveness. More specifically, it teaches us unconditional forgiveness. It teaches us forgiveness without limits. That's the kind of forgiveness a marriage needs.

There are two sides of forgiveness: giving and receiving. And we learn both of these from the Christian doctrine of justification. We look at the way God has forgiven us. He did not have to. We did not deserve it. It cost him his death. It was free and perfect. There are no strings attached. It is just pure, absolute forgiveness. It is forgiveness for every wrong thing we have ever done, said, or thought. And it is forgiveness for every wrong thing we will do, say, or think in the future. We have been forgiven much. And from this we learn that we have no right to withhold forgiveness from those who sin against us. Jesus connects God's forgiveness with our forgiveness when he teaches us to pray, **“And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us”** (Matt. 6:12; Luke 11:4). We forgive, because God has forgiven us. That's the first side of forgiveness.

The other side of forgiveness is receiving it. And receiving forgiveness can be uncomfortable. It acknowledges that we were wrong. And there is usually a feeling of uncertainty with receiving forgiveness. That's because no one ever deserves forgiveness. If you

ONE FLESH (Mark 10:2-16)

deserve it, it's not really forgiveness. That's the whole point of it. Forgiveness is never earned. Forgiveness is never deserved. And that creates a feeling of uncertainty in the person receiving it. Will God really forgive me? Will my husband or wife really forgive me? We feel uncertain because we know we don't deserve it. This makes us hesitant to seek forgiveness. It makes us afraid to confess our sin.

But God's forgiveness is not uncertain. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." We often use that as our preface for confession. And we use it over and over again, because this is one of those verses that everyone should know by heart. God invites us to confess. And he guarantees the answer before we even start. He is not uncertain. That's what the word "faithful" means. There's no uncertainty with his forgiveness. "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." This gives us freedom to confess anything and everything. We can be completely honest with God. You can lay your heart naked, and it won't change his answer. This is uncomfortable, because we know we don't deserve his forgiveness. But when we experience that forgiveness, we grow a little more comfortable with it. And as we grow more and more comfortable with God's forgiveness, there is a joyful security that develops. This is the joy of the Christian life. We live in God's forgiveness, and we rest secure knowing that we are his, and he will hold onto us, and he loves us, and not even our sin will change his mind.

Then, as we receive forgiveness from God, we also learn to receive it from others, especially our husband or wife. We know what it's like to receive love and forgiveness when we don't deserve it. God's forgiveness teaches us that it's possible to be honest about who we are, and another person can still love us. You see how this applies to marriage. This enables you to be open with your husband or wife. And this makes a healthier marriage. If we're afraid that something we do, say, or think will drive the other person away, then we won't really be honest. We won't let the other person know who we really are.

So we think of the commitment involved in marriage. It's a commitment to love unconditionally, the way God loves us. And that unconditional love includes unconditional forgiveness. There are few relationships in life where forgiveness is truly unconditional. If you violate the laws of the state, they will probably punish you. If you break the rules at work, you might get fired. There are no guarantees they will forgive you. But in marriage and the family, forgiveness is unconditional, or at least it should be. If you are married, you should make it clear to your husband or wife that there is nothing they can do that you will not forgive. Say these words, or something like them: "I will never divorce you. I will always love you. I will always forgive you." You should tell your children about this too. They need to know that mom and dad will never divorce. One of the reasons God created marriage was for the protection of children.

Now you might be thinking, "Well, what about that one thing? If my husband or wife does that one thing, do I still have to forgive them?" Yes, even that.

Think of the vows you made at your wedding. Did you reserve the right to divorce? Did you reserve the right to withhold forgiveness? You better not have!

In a moment we're going to review the wedding vow, but first, I have some advice for those who are not yet married: Do not write your own vows. Some people do that, and it's still a valid marriage. It might be romantic, but it's a bad idea. And here's why: You don't get to say what marriage is. God defines it. So the Church has written vows based on the biblical doctrine of marriage. You can make all sorts of other promises to your bride or groom on your own time. That's fine. But these are the words they need to hear, these are the words the Church needs to

ONE FLESH (Mark 10:2-16)

hear, and this is what God requires of you. If these promises are not agreeable to you, don't get married.

So here's the vow we require of both husband and wife:

I, ... in the presence of God and these witnesses, take you ... to be my wife or husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, according to God's holy Word, and I promise to be faithful to you until death separates us.

This vow holds nothing back. It reserves no rights. It has no "out clause." When we say, "I promise to be faithful to you until death separates us," we surrender every condition. The other person makes the same promise, but our promise is not contingent on theirs. That means that if your husband or wife breaks their promise, you still don't get to break yours. That's what unconditional love and unconditional forgiveness means.

In this way, marriage reflects the love God has for us. When we sin against him, he doesn't go back on his commitment to us. He forgives ... unconditionally. Forgiveness has a cost for God. The price tag was the cross. And when we forgive—I mean when we're really hurt, and we don't want to forgive, and we know the other person doesn't deserve it—it gives us just a little hint of what God's forgiveness means. In this way, the unconditional love and forgiveness of marriage comes back around and preaches to you the love and forgiveness God has for you.

Marriage is God's work. That's why it's good. And that's what makes it last. He takes two people, a husband and a wife, and makes them one flesh. And God is faithful to what he creates. He blesses this union. And he uses it to teach us the love he has for us in Christ Jesus. We all sin in our marriages. We break our vows every day. But the marriage does not go away. God's blessing does not go away. And his love for us never changes. His forgiveness has no limits, because it is based on the infinitely precious blood of Jesus, which has been shed once and for all for the forgiveness of your sins. Amen.

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