

Sermon on Mark 10:2-16
18th Sunday after Pentecost, October 4, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Some of us in this room today are old enough to remember the television series from the 1950s called *Leave It To Beaver*. Who remembers watching that program? It portrayed what some people imagined was an “ideal white suburban family” in those days, where the parents, Ward & June Cleaver responded with love and understanding no matter what their two sons, Wally and “the Beav” came up with – which never was very extreme. Contrast this family with those portrayed about 40 years later on *The Jerry Springer Show*, when the host would bring estranged members of families on camera to reveal extreme abusive behavior and dysfunctional relationships – which often disintegrated into shouting matches or physical violence. It made those who watched these characters wonder what kind of a freak show this was! Where did Jerry find such fractured families? These are just two extremes of American family experience. In between we have seen all kinds of families and relationships portrayed on the small screen, from *Little House on the Prairie* to *All in the Family*; *The Cosby Show* to *The Jeffersons*; *Eight is Enough* or *Seventh Heaven* to *Friends*. Many of us enjoy watching such portrayals of American family life, for the better ones remind us that no family is perfect and human relationships all require work in order to address our differences, even within our own families. Sometimes these dramas can, at their best, help us better understand ourselves as we watch fictitious families deal with conflict, and the same challenges we may face ourselves. But most of the family dramas on television resolve themselves within an hour or two, when the reality is that our human conflicts and issues can take years – or even a lifetime – and may never be resolved. We are well aware of the pain that can come from conflict and strife in our relationships with those we have loved. So we often find that watching family dramas on television is a welcome escape, where we see others go through the pain – and find resolution or happy endings in one episode.

But we’re not here to talk about television dramas. We’re here to listen to God’s Word from Holy Scripture and seek it’s meaning, in order to apply its lessons to our lives today – as we experience it in our homes, our families, our workplaces, and in our communities. Two of those scripture lessons today focus on relationships between men and women, and one on vulnerable children.

The first is from the story of Creation in the Book of Genesis. The author describes how God created woman from the rib of a man, a way to show the intended ideal intimacy of human relationships. The human who was alone was incomplete until he found another who would be a helpmate and partner. The

larger lesson for us is that to be fully human is to be in relationship with other human beings, and with God. This is the gift and the promise that God gives and offers us all. However, you and I know that this promise too often goes unfulfilled as we fall short in our relationships with others, as we argue and compete with our siblings and our friends, as husbands and wives drift apart and relationships come into conflict or end. The Bible is full of such stories and examples, in both the Old and New Testaments, and we are well aware of many failed relationships, in our own lives and in the lives of our friends and relatives.

One example of a failed human relationship is when a divorce occurs between a husband and a wife. So in today's gospel lesson we read how some Pharisees came to Jesus with a question, with which they hoped to test him. They asked Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" How would Jesus answer them? Whatever he said would likely offend somebody (or so they hoped).

Jesus' response was to ask them what was in the Law? They replied that Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal to divorce his wife. But Jesus said that Moses made this allowance "because of your hardness of heart." Moses wrote the rule so that women had some legal protection when their husbands grew tired of them, so that men could not just discard their wives without making a just financial settlement. But Jesus wasn't interested in merely arguing the legal merits of such a law. Jesus went immediately to the larger point: *because of your hardness of heart, because of human sin, your mistreatment of one another, that is why we need the law of Moses to limit the consequences and the harm that can result.* Then Jesus went straight to God's intent, that in marriage a husband and wife become one flesh, and what God joins together, no mere human can separate. In other words, don't take your marriage relationship so lightly, that you claim it doesn't exist just by going to court with a piece of paper!

In the final portion of this passage Jesus reacts to another example of human hardness of heart. People were bringing little children to Jesus, so that he could touch them and bless them. But children were often seen as a nuisance, and didn't hold much value in adult society (other than to their parents), so the disciples did what many adults might do, and sternly told the parents to take their children away, and quit bothering the teacher. Jesus was indignant. He told them in no uncertain terms to let the children come to him, don't stop them, for the kingdom of God belongs to them. To show his disciples the value Jesus saw in children, he took the children into his arms himself, and blessed them. Once again, society's values were turned upside down by Jesus. Human hardness of heart for children was transformed by Jesus' compassionate love for such little ones.

To me, this is the central point of Jesus' teaching today. Our human hardness of heart in our relationships with other people, from our spouses, even to little children, is rejected by Jesus, who calls our intimate relationships holy. The

most seemingly insignificant and vulnerable (that is, children) are those to whom God's kingdom most clearly belongs! That is right in the face of our worst human tendencies: to easily discard those relationships that we grow tired of, and to disregard the children and vulnerable ones among us. In extreme cases, this leads to abuse, violence, and even death in relationships where anger and hardness of heart are not addressed, and the vulnerable are not protected. We end up with the tragedies of an abusive husband murdering his wife and then killing himself when she tries to leave the relationship – which happens far too often in society today, and happened again in Lino Lakes last Thursday night.

So the point we should take from today's gospel is not that Jesus would outlaw divorce, or set up children to rule. Rather, it is to recognize that we humans take far too lightly the intent of God's great gift of human sexuality, which is to be an expression of love and intimacy between two human beings in a relationship of commitment, love, and faithfulness. We have abused the gift, which leads to our abuse of one another. I was reminded of this also on Thursday evening when late night television host David Letterman confessed to a national audience that he has had sexual relationships with women who worked on his show – and people laughed (not knowing that he wasn't joking). He was responding to an extortion plot of a television producer who allegedly wanted Letterman to pay him \$2 million not to expose his sins to the world. Is there something wrong with this picture, or is it just me? What have we done with God's great gift?

You could name all kinds of examples where we have fallen short of God's intent for us in our relationships with other human beings, with spouses, parents, and children, as well as with friends, co-workers, neighbors and even our enemies. The numbers don't lie – the many marriages that end in divorce, the high number of abusive relationships and incidents of violence in families, the many families and individuals who live in poverty or are homeless, the thousands of vulnerable children in our own community and throughout the world who don't have adequate food, shelter, education or health care. The fact that tomorrow Project Home moves in at Redeemer with a third site for homeless families with children is a clear indictment of our state and nation's hardness of heart – for what kind of a nation allows our children to become homeless, impoverished and hungry in a land of so much affluence and wealth? Our national debate around health care cannot just be about balancing the budget, lowering taxes or keeping government out of our lives. It should center on how our nation can best care for the health of all the people who live in our communities, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

So these words of Jesus from the gospel today are not just for the Pharisees or disciples of long ago. What would Jesus say to *us* about *our hardness of heart*? All of us need to examine ourselves – because sinful words and actions come from

the heart – and confess our sins of taking our relationships with others too lightly, for our own lack of compassion for those who are most vulnerable.

Thankfully, God has given us an alternative to our present condition of a people with hardened hearts. Through the life, the example, and the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus, we have been given a way out. Through faith in Christ, and following him as disciples, we can learn how to love each other as God has loved us; husbands and wives, parents and children, partners, neighbors, friends and enemies. We can have compassion for the vulnerable just like Jesus had compassion for the little children who came to him. In fact, we have many examples today and throughout church history of people with faith who have lived out such compassion for others – from well-known saints like Mother Theresa to unsung heroes in our own congregations and communities who reach out with love to children, women and men who are homeless and poor, day in and day out.

One of those examples was St. Francis of Assisi, who grew up in an affluent family in the 12th century but renounced his wealth and witnessed to his faith in Christ by founding an order of monks whose mission was to care for the poor, the sick, and all who were vulnerable – even the lowly animals of creation. Today the Church commemorates him, and in some congregations people bring animals to be blessed, just as Francis once did. I think we best commemorate St. Francis and honor God by examining ourselves and our relationships with other people – especially the poor and vulnerable - and asking God to help us transform our lives. There is a prayer attributed to St. Francis which is included in our hymnal, which asks God to make us instruments of God’s peace in our world. It is found on page 87 in the front of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Please turn to it, and let’s read it aloud together as the closing prayer of this sermon, and a next step for each of us in our personal lives:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is discord, union;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand;

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.