

## **Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost [Proper 22] (B)**

October 7, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown MD

Readings:; Psalm 8; Mark 10 2-16

### **"When The Will Can Not Find the Way"**

I was thirty years old. I was initiating the legal ending of a five year marriage. With deep shame I had returned to live in my parent's home. I remember that day was the first time as an adult that I had openly wept in my mother's arms. I had a few hundred dollars from a summer job and a new teaching position in the fall and that was about it. I was beaten down and embarrassed. Even though a priest I had visited with my husband nine months before had taken me aside and asked, "Why are you still here? It is not healthy or safe for you." Even though my Italian Roman Catholic father, a man of few words about church doctrine, said to me, "Linda, I know the church doesn't approve of divorce but I don't think God means for marriage to be so harmful either." Still I felt ashamed, a failure and disgraced. I was breaking a sacred promise I had made with deep sincerity. A promise of a lifetime together in all circumstances of life.

I would carry that guilt and shame with me into churches where I would dread the days when the gospel I just read was the reading for the day. Inevitably, a preacher would cite the escalating divorce rate and follow it with a comment like this, "People seem to be getting in and out of marriage like it's nothing at all. People get divorced at the drop of a hat." And I would feel humiliated, condemned and rejected all over again. But I also felt a growing anger. I hadn't gotten into or out of marriage thoughtlessly or casually. I was more than a statistic and how dare someone reduce my experience to a popular, glib, throw away line. Little did I know that one day I would be a pastor charged with preaching on this gospel. As tempting as it might be to just skip down to the part of the gospel reading about Jesus and the children, that would certainly be somewhat cowardly and dishonest of me --- like trying to talk around an elephant sitting in the middle of the room. But the more I've studied this passage, the more I've come to see that the elephant, the point is even larger than marriage or divorce --- it's about the intent and will of the Creator and our Adam and Eve selves second guessing God in our sinful world. Which means, there's more than enough to make us all squirm, whatever our marital status.

The Pharisees, religious leaders seriously concerned about right and wrong, interrupt Jesus as he's teaching to pose a "test" question, "Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?"

Everyone there knows that divorce was permissible among the Hebrews. In the book of Deuteronomy it speaks of a husband being able to divorce his wife with a written certificate, on the grounds that she “does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her.” (Duet. 24: 1a) The debate among the Hebrew leaders was what constituted “objectionable”? Some of the religious teachers said adultery was the only grounds. Others said it could be because the woman didn’t cook well or didn’t obey or the man found another woman more pleasing. The Pharisees wondered where would Jesus come down in this and what religious leaders he would offend? Or maybe, they wondered, if Jesus would even anger Herod, married to his brother’s wife, and lose his head like John the Baptist.

Jesus does not fall into the trap. First, Jesus points out the provision for divorce arose out of human sinfulness, “hardness of heart,” our “yes, but” response to God’s commands. The Israelites fell short of their call to be God’s distinctive people, to show the world in their lives God’s ways and love. Thus, for the sake of order in the community and to provide some protection for women, Moses gave directions for divorce. But Jesus redirects the conversation from divorce to marriage, from exceptions to God’s will. The Pharisees cite Deuteronomy. Jesus cites the creation stories of Genesis. The Pharisees want to talk human rules and allowable loopholes for divorce. Jesus wants to talk about recovering God’s will for marriage.

God created marriage, a life-long relationship in which two become one flesh, life-long partners and help-mates. In their faithfulness and mutual passion to care for the other, they are to grow the kind of love our Lord has for us. Marriage was to provide each partner (and their children) with the security and support to become all God created them to be and bless the world. Marriage and children, both gift and responsibility, requires commitment, other-directed love and an intentional focus on the quality and character of the relationship rather than how to keep a cleared path to the exit door. Jesus wants to challenge the Pharisees and his own disciples to consider discussing and teaching about marriage and what God intended for that relationship as thoroughly and seriously as they seem to want to debate divorce.

Whenever I walk through the ten commandments with a class of confirmation students or adults, I anticipate wrestling with our “hardness of heart” each step of the way. Keep the Sabbath. But pastor, what if you have to work or you’re ill or weather’s bad? Do not kill. But what about self-defense? Pastor what about war? Do not steal. But what if you’re

starving, pastor or what about getting answers from a classmate because you forgot to take your book home and you don't want to get disqualified from the soccer game and let your team down? It's not that any of these aren't legitimate concerns for consideration, but it moves our focus from God's plan and desire for us to justifying ourselves in a sinful world. It can easily become an Eden habit to make God's commands relative to my situation – instead of struggling to understand the meaning and purpose of God' life-giving ways and trying to conform my life to them. We must not forget how to feel pain or remorse when we go a different way than God's. It's a contrite and bruised heart that seems able to receive the grace and healing of our Lord's forgiveness.

One of the reasons I was so very devastated and hurt by my divorce was because I knew that my married life as well as divorce were contrary to God's desire for a married couple. Yes, there was mental illness and abuse in my case but that doesn't make God's ideal for marriage less right, it just means despite our efforts two flawed humans fell short. That's why I felt guilt and sadness. I've learned regret is a pretty spiritually, healthy response to sin and the pain and chaos it creates.... as long as that is doesn't stop there. Jesus, who came with a special concern for those considered sinners and outcast, tells us our failings and guilt are not be the end of the story. As I dragged my shame and broken-ness about, I came to learn through a Lutheran pastor and a motley group of friends, that God's grace and forgiveness were not just nice words. It's the sinner who knows they need forgiveness. It's the broken who know they need healing. It's the fallen who know that hope and strength will need to come from somewhere outside themselves. And it's our Lord --- seeker of the lost, party-giver for the returning wayward son --- who says "you're forgiven," "let me heal you", "I will be your strength and way to a new life in abundance."

It's no accident that Mark follows this stern teaching about marriage, divorce and God's will with Jesus welcoming and blessing the children. Jesus has just confronted us all with our sinful tendency to focus on exceptions rather than God's ways. Jesus has refused to quibble semantics and loopholes and calls us to live as God has called us to live. And, the impossibility of that sits on us like a weight we can not hope to lift. But then there are these children that the disciples want to dismiss. They had no influence, power or even control of their lives. Who knows, maybe they were being brought to Jesus because they were suffering from illness or other problems. In short, they had absolutely *nothing* to offer Jesus

to gain his acceptance or love. Yet Jesus says, “come” and he takes them in his arms and blesses them.

Married, divorced, single or widowed, we are called to live in all of God’s commands so we can know the fullness of life for which we were created. We know it’s impossible on our own. But fear of falling short is no excuse for playing games with God’s commands so I can feel better. It’s not just a matter of “Is it lawful?” but also “Is it pleasing to you, Lord?” My divorce helped me to rediscover I was one of those children standing before Jesus, hurting and utterly dependent on his mercy. By God’s grace, I discovered again the Lord’s assurance that I would be taken in his arms of forgiveness and blessed with God’s presence as I tried *again* to live faithfully. And I fell in love again with God’s loving will and intent, as challenging as it is, because God says to us” “I love you.. I will *never* divorce you...” Amen

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