

*And All of Us, Beloved Children of God*

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 27  
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy, Ph.D.

Sunday, October 4, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 8;  
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

*Message directed to the children of the Cherub Choir following the baptism of Liam Robert Brown:*

*Did you all see what we just did a little time ago with the baby? And did you see how the baby acted? What made the baby upset? No, it wasn't the water – he was upset before I added the water, which made him even more upset! That's right, I was holding him – and it wasn't his mom. What happened when I gave him back to Mom? That's right, he stopped crying. Do you know why? He wanted his mom because his mom loved him and cared for him and held him just right. And do you know what? Jesus wants us to understand that that's how God loves us; that His arms are open to us just like you saw Liam Robert's mom open her arms to him and hold him. I'll bet you saw another thing, too – he didn't cry when his dad held him, either, did he? I noticed that.*

*And this message was directed to the members of the Matins Choir before the sermon.*

*We're going to be talking in the Gospel about what Jesus had to say about divorce and broken relationships and all that sort of thing. I want you to try and listen to what I'm saying, because if you understand what I'm saying, it will help you a great deal. You see, one of the big traps we fall into when we read God's word, is to think that somehow He's putting down some rules that we'd better follow or we're in deep trouble. Often that's not what he's saying, but we don't hear it because we're not listening carefully. I want you to listen to how I talk about this this morning. There are no stories to tell you this morning; instead, we're going to talk about something very serious: how human relationships can go wrong and people are very hurt and broken; how all of us are broken people, because there's not one of us who hasn't done something wrong in God's eyes; and how using little children, God helps us to understand that even when we've got it wrong, He loves us no matter what. I hope you can follow what I'm saying. (P.S. I told it this way to you because I knew you'd be okay, but I wanted the adults to overhear so they would understand as well.)*

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

This morning's gospel reading is what I refer to as a "groaner." It doesn't groan, but when I read it, I do. At first reading the text appears to be a harsh condemnation of divorce and those who

remarry after a divorce. So I groan. What preacher in his right mind wants to preach on such a text?

There are not many of us, if any, who have not in some way, been touched by the break-up of a marriage and divorce. I've heard some say their divorce was amicable, straightforward – even agreeable. But, before that agreement was reached, I'm pretty sure there was a lot of difficulty, and suffering, and pain. But that's not all. Jesus' words labeling those who remarry after a divorce as "adulterers" is a harsh message indeed.

But stop for a moment. Is that really what Jesus is doing here? I think the first step to a deeper and more meaningful understanding is to explore the context in which the whole issue is raised. Even in Jesus' day, divorce was a hot button issue. There was a running disagreement among the Pharisees of the time in regard to divorce and whether or not it was lawful. You know, it's very easy to take a shallow approach to these Pharisees and cast them as the rotten bad guys, instinctively opposed to Jesus and everything good, and not listening to His unsettling new instructions.

But, the Pharisees might be better understood when we realize they weren't bad guys at all. They were genuinely faithful men, committed to God. They were deeply concerned that any misunderstanding or misapplication of scripture, particularly God's law, would be a great affront to God and would end up luring the people into disastrous ways of thinking and acting.

What was at the heart of the whole thing, what was at stake, was how were they to understand and interpret Deuteronomy 24:1 which reads: "Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house."

Whoa! One school of Pharisees, led by Shammai, held to a very conservative, literal and stringent interpretation of those words. They held that if and when a husband found "something objectionable" about his wife, then he could simply write a note, repeating three times that he divorced her, and the marriage was dissolved and she was out of house and home. Just as simple as that.

That position was hotly contested by a second group of Pharisees, led by Hillel, who took a far more liberal and permissive view of the whole thing. And the debate, my friends – ah, the debate (the House debate is nothing compared to this), their debate back there amongst those Pharisees, was hot and heavy. That debate about what constitutes an acceptable marriage, what the grounds are for divorce and remarriage has continued every year down through the ages. In fact it continues to be a hotly contested issue right now in our own day and time.

So when the Pharisees asked Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" they are inviting Jesus to reveal which side He supports. Then one side or the other would be in a position to discredit Him on the basis simply of how He answered the question. As a result Jesus would be shown to be nothing more than just another opinionated teacher. But Jesus will have none of their legalistic arguments. He pushes behind the argument of the law to the story of Creation.

Rather than resort to a sweeping legal prohibition to exclude any and all divorce, Jesus recalls God's original intent for marriage.

At issue was the human condition called "hardness of heart" (and I doubt that there's one of us sitting in a pew this morning, no matter how old we are, who hasn't demonstrated "hardness of heart" over something or another). It was not a problem peculiar to Moses' day and age, and it isn't peculiar to ours for divorce still takes place.

In our day and time the Church never really welcomes divorce. However, we also know that there are some marriages that just should not continue. To perpetuate a destructive and toxic relationship which is beyond any reconciliation would only exacerbate and compound irreparable harm and misery. There are any number of people deeply committed to following Christ and faithful members of congregations who have been released by divorce from such impossible and horrendous relationships.

And, there are just as many divorced, again in congregations of faithful Christians, who thought being divorced would be the last thing that would ever happen to them. So we in the church acknowledge with compassion and understanding the suffering and loss which is in every divorce, and our trust in God who nonetheless restores and renews those living through and after such horror and suffering.

But there something is still missing from our understanding, just as it was missed by the disciples, who questioned Jesus further when they have the opportunity to do so in the privacy of a home. And their questioning elicited from Jesus a statement that, in my view, requires a very careful reading indeed, if in fact it's to be understood correctly.

It is so easy to read Jesus' words to the disciples as a harsh condemnation of remarriage. But, it seems to me, that Jesus' words are more a descriptive statement about the brokenness of the human condition in terms of remarriage and adultery, rather than a harsh condemnation. After all, beloved, are we not all broken in our own sinfulness, even though we've never been involved in divorce or a subsequent remarriage? And this might seem to be a flight into liberal theology, if it were not for the verses which form the climax of this morning's gospel reading.

I think that ending is easily misinterpreted and overlooked. It's something like the disciples' reaction when they were flabbergasted by Jesus' announcement of His forthcoming arrest, trial, suffering and crucifixion. So shocked were they, that they overlook completely His final statement about rising from the dead on the third day. We too can be so overwhelmed by the nature of the beginning of this lesson that we miss what's happening at the end, and that's the whole point.

Surrounded by a crowd of people bringing their children to Jesus that He might just touch them, the disciples are appalled and literally tell crowd and children where to get off and where to go. It's an indignant Jesus who retorts, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Two parts of Jesus' angry retort to the disciples are worth paying attention to. First, Jesus says, "It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." The disciples, bless their hearts, are part and parcel of an ancient society whose valuation of children was low indeed. The child in antiquity was a non-person.

You see, our notions of childhood are the exact opposite. They have their origins in a concept of childhood that began in the nineteenth century, the 1800's, and has been developed since. But prior to that, our ideas of childhood did not exist. Before that, children were nobodies. They only achieved significance when they reached puberty, and in Jesus' society, when they had their bar or bat mitzvah, when they were able to marry, when they were able to have a family – then they were of account.

The children around Jesus in the gospel reading, according to the ancient tradition, should have been with the women, not hanging around Jesus and His disciples. They had no status, they had no rights, and their presence was a nuisance. But wouldn't you know it, Jesus sees things completely differently. Jesus teaches that the rule of God belongs to persons like this: powerless, vulnerable, weak. Can we admit that about ourselves? In rejecting the children, the disciples haven't just made a slight error of judgment; they've missed the whole point of Jesus' ministry and gospel.

Second, Jesus says, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Not only do the children serve as poignant examples of those for whom the rule of God is intended, but also their manner of receiving it becomes the model for adults. The weight clearly falls on the verb "receive," which rules out all the sentimental stuff about childhood and children. The text doesn't idealize anything about children; no particular characteristics or anything like that. Instead, it talks about the receiving of the kingdom by powerless persons, who have no claims, nor any demands, to make.

Did anybody stop in the service this morning to ask Liam Robert whether he was consenting or not? And when he protested, what did we do? We continued on and thrust him back in his mother's arms so he would hush up.

The gospel talks about receiving the kingdom by powerless people who have no claims nor any demands to make. The rule of God comes as pure, unadulterated grace, to children without status, and to hungry people at the crossroads and in the byways of life who in one wonderful gospel story, are invited to attend a scrumptious banquet after the righteous have turned down the inviter. Children, the poor, the powerless have no excuses to give, no dowries to offer, no bargaining chips. Whether we are successful or unsuccessful at our marriages, whether we have managed to achieve the profound union God intends, or from "hardness of heart" have wound up in divorce courts, the receiving of the kingdom, like a little child, still holds. There's not one of us here who has bargaining chips to trade in, nor does our failure (and we have plenty) disqualify us. It's just this incredible picture of otherwise rejected children welcomed and given a blessing that sustains both the happily married, the painfully separated, and the joyous and excited remarried. And that, says Jesus, is just the point.

A child can receive the kingdom of heaven without offering, without claim, without calculation; it's an unmerited gift. Such is the clear transaction of grace. If children *qualified* for the kingdom, then what would happen to grace? And if we imitate children in order to *qualify*, then what happens to us?

Children are brought to receive Jesus' blessing, and so are we. Isn't it true, beloved, that we've gathered here this morning for a chance to glimpse God's love and compassion and care and receive His forgiveness and blessing? Just in the same way that Liam Robert was received into the arms of God and marked indelibly as a child of His forever; a precious possession that God will not lose. Secure in this understanding of the gospel reading, then beloved, broken and battered as we are, let us gather at God's table of grace, to nibble a wafer and a dip of wine, to hear and know that we are, above all else, God's beloved children, forgiven, beloved, and freely granted a brand new life.

Now tell me, is that something to groan about?

Amen.