

“The Gift of Family”. Mark 10:2-16 Oct. 7, 2018 @ Chapel Hill

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Not too long ago I entered a public restroom and was greeted by an overwhelming unpleasant odor. A man was standing at one of those convenient tables changing the diaper of an infant. “*Been there, done that*” I thought to myself, though it was a long time ago. My next thought was to reflect on the fact that this most unpleasant, disagreeable act had once been done for me a very long time ago, and that in my doddering old age it may have to be done for me again. The mind of an old man goes in strange places. It is a sobering thought that we come into this world and often go out of this world utterly and completely dependent upon the care of others. We don’t like that. We like to think of ourselves as independent. “*I can take care of myself, thank you.*” But we really can’t.

This reality was reinforced recently as thousands of hurricane victims found themselves being rescued and are recovering now from Florence. It is encouraging to see such an out-pouring of care and generosity. In so many ways, we need each other. It is a sad thing that it seems to take a disaster for us to recognize this and act on it. It takes a tragedy for us to get in touch with our better selves. We are created to be in relationship with each other and with God himself. We are created to be in families, and are part of the whole human family. **We are interdependent.** We need each other. And the primary context for us to experience this interdependence is in the gift of family.

I think this is really what Jesus is getting at in our text when the Pharisees come with their question about divorce in Mosaic Law. They want to quibble about the conditions which might justify divorce. Jesus responds by getting back to fundamentals.” *In the beginning, God made them male and female. For this reason, a man shall leave his mother and father and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one... interdependent. What God has joined, let no one separate. This is the plan, the blueprint for your well-being.* Tamper with it at your own risk!

**The disciples are confused.** When they are alone they ask him to expand on this idea... what are you saying about divorce? He doesn’t hesitate or equivocate...He is against it. It is wrong. It is tantamount to adultery. It is sin. I suspect the disciples were surprised, startled. You are probably aware that divorce in that society was very common and very easy to obtain. A man could go down the courthouse, so to speak, and for a few shekels get a divorce for something as quibbling as “*she burns the toast.*” She, of course, had no recourse and could not herself get a divorce under any circumstance. Totally sexist...and very prevalent, but probably not more than today. What are the statistics? 35%?

Yes, we know it is a huge problem. I doubt there is a family here that has not been impacted by a divorce in your extended family or immediate family, or even yourself. And we know it is wrong. It is true that the scripture in other passages makes allowance for adultery and/or abandonment, implying that the “innocent party” in these circumstances may move on. Truth is, I’ve never encountered anyone who is totally innocent. Be that as it may, it is still wrong. There may be, indeed there are circumstances where it is the best option, but at best It can only be the lesser of evils, and it carries heavy consequences. Such a guilt burden. I’ve never encountered anyone who has gone through a divorce saying, “*that was one of the better times of my life.*” The only real surprise is the seeming continued efforts of our culture to make light of it, to consider it rather normative and ordinary, rather to be expected. How else to explain the phenomenon of pre-nuptial agreements?

In my files I came upon an old article in Atlantic magazine where the author, Barbara Whitehead, argues that two parent families are better for child-rearing than single parenting. Duh! One would think that is obvious, but she was met with a barrage of criticism and argument in spite of all the

statistical evidence... 3 of 4 teen suicides occur in single parent families...80% of adolescents in mental health facilities, 75% of the teens in the criminal justice system... etc. Our culture just doesn't want to deal with the guilt. We treat marriage as a fascinating experiment in human living arrangements. If it works out, great, but if not well just move on. No harm, no foul. Would that it were that simple.

There is no denying that **maintaining a healthy marriage is difficult**. Even **Martin Luther** jokes at one point that it might have been better if God had created one garden for Adam and another for Eve. Evidently he long ago understood all that business about men being from Mars and women from Venus. But the problem isn't marriage. Marriage is a wonderful thing, ordained by God for our benefit. The problem is that marriage requires a lot of self-sacrifice. You have to share everything. The mythical 50-50 arrangement is not enough. When you marry you give yourself, 100%, to another person, richer or poorer, sickness and health, etc. Let's be real. We really don't like to do that. To quote Luther again, "*sin is the heart all curled up inside itself.*" You can't live by the Frank Sinatra principle. "**I'll do it my way!**" and have a healthy marriage.

We're back to the "diaper principle". Interdependence. It is in serving, caring for others, and humbly acknowledging our need to be cared for...that we discover our true self, our better self. *Jesus came into this world not to be served, but to serve and give his life for others*. And he never stops reminding us that this is the way we find wholeness and fulfillment. This is the model, the blueprint. And there is no place that gives us a better opportunity to live out this servant model than as a spouse and parent.

Even more importantly, marriage and family provide one of the best **opportunities for experiencing the Gospel**. We often talk about the Gospel, the wonder of God's love for a fallen world, how he lived and died and rose again that our sins might be forgiven, our relationship with God reestablished. But talking about the Gospel always seems a bit abstract. In marriage and family, it becomes very concrete, real, something experienced.

In pre-marital counseling I always tells couples that the three most important words in marriage are not "*I love you*", but "*I am sorry*" or "*I was wrong*." And then to hear the three lovely words, "*I forgive you*". And it is done, forever erased. Confession and absolution. The Gospel in action. The Gospel experienced. Forgiving as we have been forgiven.

Tragically, I suspect that the person against whom I sin most consistently, sins of omission and commission, is my dear wife. Thoughtless words, selfish deeds. She knows the "me" that I try not to let the rest of the world see. And she loves me still...for nearly 58 years! Amazing grace! Don't you have a "me" that you try not to let others see?

And the place where I got most in touch with my self-centeredness was in my parenting. How dare these children require, demand so much of my time, my energy, my faithful commitment? The needs are endless. And how powerful and humbling it is to experience their pardon for my failings and their unqualified love.

As we **come to the Lord's Table this day**, let us come with grateful hearts...grateful that he would allow his body to be broken, his blood shed, that we might be part of his family, forgiven and redeemed... but also grateful for our own human families, the place where we are privileged to live out the Gospel, to make it tangible, experiential, to forgive as we've been forgiven. It is in the family we become especially aware of our interdependence. We need each other. First, we need the Lord. Then we need each other.

*What God hath joined together, let no one separate*. It is the blueprint for a life of blessings. Amen.