

### **“That’s the Way God Planned It”**

“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Long before I discovered that I have absolutely no talent with them, I became fascinated with building model airplanes. Several of my friends were building these terrific models that they had hanging in their bedrooms, and I thought that it would be great if I put one on the ceiling of my bedroom at home; so one day I went to the store in town that sold model kits and bought one that looked great on the box. I cleared a table in the basement and laid out all of the model's pieces, along with the glue and instructions that offered step-by-step guidance on building a model that would be an exact replica of a real airplane. I devoted hours and hours to the task of gluing together all of the small pieces in the kit, following the instructions closely and making certain that I was doing everything correctly; but sadly, when I was finished my model didn't look anything like the photo on the box (it really didn't even look like an airplane). I don't know what happened (outside of my lack of skill), but what I had created was not the way that model was supposed to be.

There are many circumstances in which, despite our best efforts, what we create does not turn out the way it's supposed to be. We may watch a program on the Food Network and decide that we would like to prepare what the chef created on the program, so we compile all of the ingredients and follow the recipe assiduously; but what ends up on our dinner table looks nothing like the dish we saw on television. We may hear a piece of music and decide that we would like to perform it, so we buy the sheet music and practice for countless hours; but when the time of our performance arrives, our presentation bears little resemblance to what we had heard. A visit to a friend's newly-renovated kitchen may inspire us to update our outdated cooking area, so we buy home renovation books and spend hours at the Home Depot buying the most up-to-date products, spending days and days tearing out the old and installing the new; but when we finally take a look at the fruits of our labors, we sadly realize that what we find in our home and what is in our friend's home are starkly different. On many occasions, what we have created does not turn out the way it was supposed to be.

When we look around us at God's good creation, there are signs of how our world was supposed to be when God created it. The creation stories in Genesis describe the creation that God declared to be good, and how human beings were placed in the midst of this good creation to *“have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”* (Genesis 1:26). God gave humanity all of the goodness of creation *“out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!”* (*Small Catechism*). All that was expected of the people who were placed in the midst of this wondrous world was that they *“thank and praise, serve and obey him.”*

Of all of the blessings that God intended for humanity to enjoy in this wonderful world, the greatest was the gift that is at the pinnacle of the created order: the gift of other people with whom we can share all of these gifts. In our first lesson from the second chapter of Genesis, God evaluates the situation and declares that something is not yet good: the man God has created is alone, and *“it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”* (2:18). This “helper” (*ezer*) is how God is identified in Psalm 121:1-2: *“I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.”* As God would be the helper of God's people, God knew

that the man needed someone to be his helper in this good creation. So first God *"formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air"* (2:19), bringing them to the man in a kind of parade. The man gives names to all the animals, but in none of them does he find *"a helper as his partner."* (2:20). God accepts the decision, designing a building a new creature called "woman" out of already existing material: *"the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman"* (2:22). In the presence of this newly-created woman, the man speaks and declares that now he has the one who will be his God-given helper: *"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for our of Man this one was taken."* (2:23). The use of similar-sounding Hebrew names recognizes both the sameness and difference within humanity as the man recognizes that the situation which once was "not good" has now become "good." Created as *"bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh,"* God has given them a relationship that is based on mutuality and equality. It forms the foundation of marriage in which two become "one flesh," recognizing that man and woman constitute an indissoluble unit of humankind from every perspective.

The creation stories in Genesis that culminate in the creation of human beings are a description of the way God's creation is supposed to be, the world that was the way God planned it. But you don't need to be a Bible scholar to know that this is clearly not the world in which we live, we seems to be far removed from the goodness of this creation. God entrusted the creation to humanity, but like someone who keeps coming up short in their efforts to make something the way it's supposed to be the history of humanity is one of our constantly misusing God's creation for our own selfish gains, turning something that was meant to be a blessing for all people into a gift that is denied to far too many people. Even the gift of marriage, which God created to bring love and joy to humanity, is far too often not the way it's supposed to be. The wording of the marriage service in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* summarizes why what we have created in holy matrimony is not the way God planned it to be:

- "The Lord God in his goodness created us male and female, and by the gift of marriage founded human community in a joy that begins now and is brought to perfection in the life to come. [But] because of sin, our age-old rebellion, the gladness of marriage can be overcast and the gift of the family can become a burden."

Jesus is challenged to provide a teaching on the reality of marriage that was not the way that God had planned it when *"some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'"* (Mark 10:2). This is not the first time that the Pharisees have tried to discredit Jesus' reputation as a teacher; their primary challenge has been to Jesus' treatment of traditional teaching, questioning why Jesus does require his disciple to fast or to observe the Sabbath laws. But as he has done previously, Jesus answers their efforts at entrapment by appealing to Scripture; so instead of providing the Pharisees with the direct answer they desire, he responds with his own question: *"What did Moses command you?"* (10:3), knowing that they would of course have knowledge of the teaching of Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

- "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 and goes off to become another man's wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who marries dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the LORD, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession."

The Pharisees may have believed that they were gaining the upper hand in their encounter with Jesus with their answer; but Jesus *“turns the tables on his opponents by demonstrating that they are only interested in preserving the Law as they understand it, not in doing God’s will.”* (Pheme Perkins). Another ominous cloud that is lurking over this scene is the recent execution of John the Baptist, whose death was partly the result of his criticism of Herod Antipas’ divorce and remarriage (*“For John had been telling Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’”* – 6:18). While it is not overtly mentioned in this scene, the Pharisees might be hoping that Jesus will meet the same fate as John if his answer is similar to the Baptist’s. But instead of commenting on the Law by debating the circumstances under which a husband might be permitted to divorce his wife (notice that Deuteronomy says nothing a wife divorcing her husband), Jesus asks what God intended at creation: *“But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’”* (10:6). Jesus does not deny the Mosaic teaching, but insists that the reason it exists is *“because of you hardheartedness [God] wrote this commandment for you.”* (10:5). The Law did not exist in creation, because the way God planned it for humanity was that they would live together in mutual love and support without any need for rules and regulations. It was only when sinfulness and rebelliousness began to infect the goodness of the creation that the Law was introduced so that sinful humanity would not destroy itself. While God gave the Law to Israel so that they could live together as a free people following their liberation from slavery in Egypt, it was not the way it was supposed to be when God created the heavens and the earth.

Mark’s readers know that the Kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated does not belong to the hard-hearted, faithless generation with which Jesus constantly has to contend (*“You faithless generation, how much longer must I put up with you?”* -9:19), and that Jesus opposed substituting human traditions for the commandment of God (*“You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!”* – 7:9). As God intended men and women to be permanently joined together in marriage, no human tradition can claim the authority to override that fact: *“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”* (10:9). Jesus quotes directly from the creation story in Genesis to exhibit the absurdity of thinking that a divorce “law,” whatever conditions it sets down, somehow represents God’s Will, for when God created man and woman and they are joined together in matrimony, *“they become one flesh.”* (Genesis 2:24). *“Divorce would be like trying to divide one person into two.”* (Perkins).

Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees does not culminate with a legal ruling by our Lord. Instead, Jesus castigates the Pharisees for cooperating with the hard-heartedness of an evil generation by substituting human traditions for God’s intention. Jesus also avoids taking sides on the hidden question of Herod Antipas’ marriage to his sister-in-law. Instead, he focuses on what is most important for his disciples: God’s intention in creating human beings. He reinforces this with his disciples when they *“asked him again about this matter”* (10:10). Instead of referring to the passage from Deuteronomy, Jesus’ response is based on the Greco-Roman practice in which either a husband or a wife could seek a divorce: *“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”* (10:11-12). While Jesus’ statement makes his understanding of marriage clear, it does not provide the basis for creating a new legal code concerning divorce and remarriage. Jesus’ focus is on what God intended for humanity in creation, which takes priority over other provisions of the Law of Moses. It is not Jesus’ purpose in this teaching to create new legislation, but to point out once again that what exists is not what God intended; this is not the way God planned it to be.

- “By treating marriage as grounded in God’s creative love, Jesus removes it from the realm of law. The first-century audience was familiar with marriage as a contract. As with any contract, it could be nullified. Jesus was not the only one to challenge the casual attitude of his day, but, unlike the Essenes, he did not think new law would create the spirit in which disciples would live out his teaching... The questions he poses about a hard-hearted or utilitarian view of marriage are still crucial for our reflection, not because we want tough laws against divorce, but because we seek to make Christian families what God intended them to be.” – Perkins.

Over the years, it has been my privilege as a pastor to preside at hundreds of marriage services. On each of these occasions, I have witnessed a bride and groom promise to love and cherish each other and to be faithful to one another for as long as they both shall live. When I announce that *“by their promises before God and in the presence of this assembly [they] have joined themselves together as husband and wife,”* I also remind the newly-married couple as well as all of the assembled witnesses of Jesus’ words that *“those whom God has joined together let no one separate,”* As I think back on all of these couples I have married, I am convinced that all of them were sincere when they made these vows to each other; but I am also aware that many of these marriages did not last. There are many reasons why marriages end, and we lament that too many marital unions end in divorce. But none of us – especially any who have gone through the painful ordeal of divorce – should hear Jesus’ words as condemnation for their failures, for that is not what Jesus is teaching. We must always keep in mind that *“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”* (John 3:17), and that *“there is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* (Romans 8:1). Martin Luther’s explanation of the Sixth Commandment in the *Small Catechism* emphasizes not judgment but God’s intention at creation that marriage be a blessing for those who are united as husband and wife: *“We are to fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honours his or her spouse.”* Jesus’ renunciation of the Pharisees’ casual attitude toward marriage and divorce emphasizes the blessedness of marriage and the hope that even when marriages do not last the way God planned them to be, there is still hope for new beginnings in our Saviour who came to restore our relationships with God and one another to the way they are supposed to be when God created the heavens and the earth.

- “This scene plays out while Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, and his road takes him beyond the usual boundaries so that he might bring the gospel to all people. We also know that when Jesus gets to Jerusalem, he himself will be dismissed, put away, and taken beyond the boundaries of the city to be hung on a cross in the middle of a garbage heap. All this he endures in order to witness most fully and profoundly to God’s abundant mercy, steadfast love, and amazing grace for *all* people, regardless of their condition.” – David Lose, *Working Preacher*.

Even as we mourn the reality that many marriages – as well as many human relationships – do not turn out the way God planned them to be, we also rejoice in the hope that *“because God, who established marriage, continues still to bless it with his abundant and ever-present support, we can be sustained in our weariness and have our joy restored.”* (*Lutheran Book of Worship*). When even our best efforts do not turn out the way God planned them, there is also hope for new life and fresh beginnings in the one who has made all things new. We continue to live in trust and hope, knowing that our creator God who has planned a wonderful world for us abides with us always, and even when we fall short of God’s expectations and fail to care for what God has given us in the way they are supposed to be, God continues to love us, redeem us, and offer us love and hope that will not let us go – because *that’s* the way God planned it. Amen.