

“That’s The Way God Planned It”

“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

There is a difference between the way things are and the way things are meant to be. The Pharisees were a group of devout Jews who were focused on preserving things as they were, on keeping the traditions of their ancestors and resisting any perceived deviations from their interpretation of the Torah. So it is not surprising that when they first received news about a teacher from Nazareth who was attracting large crowds to hear his teachings about what he called the “Kingdom of God” that they immediately became suspicious. In fact, throughout the Gospels the Pharisees are presented as persons who are intent on destroying Jesus and removing the threat they perceived his teaching to have on their interpretation of the Word of God. In Mark’s Gospel, the primary challenge posed by the Pharisees and other groups of religious leaders such as the scribes has been to Jesus’ treatment of traditional teaching:

- “And as he sat at dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ When Jesus heard this, he said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’” – Mark 2:15-17.
- “Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands … So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’ He said to them, ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.” You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’” – Mark 7:1-8.

Given this history between Jesus and the Pharisees, it is not surprising that Mark begins today's Gospel lesson by reporting that "*some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'*" (10:2). The Pharisees questioned Jesus not to learn from him, but to put him to the test, another attempt to trap Jesus and show before the crowds that he is not a true teacher of God's Word; interestingly, the word "test" is the same one Mark uses to describe Satan's temptation of Jesus in the wilderness: "*He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*" (1:13). The Pharisees have no desire to learn from Jesus as one of his students; because they perceive him as a threat to the *status quo*, their interpretation of the way things should be, their goal is to discredit Jesus and eliminate the threat he poses to their teaching and authority.

Since he has dealt with the treachery of the Pharisees and other opponents on numerous occasions, Jesus will not fall into the trap they are setting for him. Instead, he answers with a question of his own: "*What did Moses command you?*" (10:3). As persons who are well-versed in the teachings of the Torah, the Law of Moses, Jesus knows that they have knowledge of the teaching in Deuteronomy that permitted a man in certain situations to divorce his wife:

- "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 the house (or the second man who married her 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." – Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

It is not surprising that the Pharisees would know the answer to Jesus' question; what will surprise them is the way in which 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. Jesus will teach them and all who hear his words that for God's people, *there is a difference between the way things are and the way they are meant to be, the way God planned it at creation*. Jesus refuses to deal with the Pharisees on their terms; instead, he responds that "*because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.*" (10:5). Jesus is teaching that there is a difference between the way in which God created the heavens and the earth – the way God intended creation to be – and the way humanity tainted this good creation

through their sinfulness, which necessitated the giving of the Law so that sinful humanity could live together in peace. While the Pharisees were focused on what was “lawful” or “allowed,” Jesus speaks of what is “commanded”: *“Jesus is concerned about the Will of God; his adversaries, while appearing to share that concern, care only about their own rights and how much they can get by with.”* (Lamar Williamson, Jr.). What his opponents design as a trap, Jesus seizes as an occasion to teach about the gracious will of God at creation. Jesus shifts the ground of the discussion from loopholes that may be permitted to the intention of what is commanded.

- “This shift marks a fundamental victory over legalism and moves the discussion into the area of gift and grace, which is more demanding but also more free. Jesus points to the goodness of God’s design in creation and to the goal of a man and a woman living together as heirs of the grace of life.” – Williamson.

Jesus shifts the focus of his teaching beyond the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai to the creation, where *“from the beginning ‘God made them male and female’”* (10:6). Jesus is referencing the Genesis account of creation (which is today’s first lesson) in which God declares that *“it is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner”* (Genesis 2:18). God creates woman, and the Scriptures declare that *“therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh”* (2:24). At the conclusion of this creation, *“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good”* (Genesis 1:31). It is to this account of the way God intended his creation to exist to which Jesus points as he teaches that *“therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate”* (10:9). Jesus’ focus is on the determination to seek God’s Will for humanity in creation, not in the conditions of a world marked by sin which necessitated the giving of Law. God intended people to be permanently joined in marriage, so no human tradition can claim the authority to override that fact. Jesus refuses to fall into the Pharisees’ trap of issuing the legal ruling they desire; instead, he castigates the Pharisees for cooperating in the “hard heartedness” of an evil generation by substituting human traditions for God’s intention. *“Jesus focuses on what concerns his followers: God’s intention in creating human beings.”* (Pheme Perkins). Jesus is not content with perpetuating the *status quo* which was the goal of the Pharisees; he has come to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God and the fulfillment of God’s Will in restoring the relationship that God intended in creation that had been ruptured by human sinfulness.

Mark typically has Jesus provide further instruction for his disciples apart from the crowds. After his encounter with the Pharisees has concluded, Jesus gathers with

his disciples, and it is here “*in the house [that] the disciples asked him again about this matter.*” (10:10). Jesus’ response ignores the statute in Deuteronomy in which only a husband could sue for divorce; instead, he refers to the Greco-Roman practice in which either party could initiate divorce proceedings: “*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). Although Jesus’ response makes his understanding of marriage clear – based on his focus on the establishment of marriage at creation – it does not provide the basis for creating a new legal code concerning divorce and remarriage. Jesus wishes to insist that God’s intentions for human beings, set forth in the Ten Commandments, take priority over other provisions in the Law of Moses.

- “Jesus does not legislate by saying ‘no remarriage,’ but he recognizes what divorce and remarriage do to the residual relationship with a former partner and insists that his disciples understand that the problem cannot be avoided by legal means.” – Williamson.

While Jesus’ reference to “adultery” may appear harsh and judgmental, it is in keeping with his focus on God’s intention for humanity at creation, which is Luther’s focus in his explanation of the Sixth Commandment in the *Small Catechism*: “*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.*” Marriages, along with all human relationships, were intended to be sources of love and support:

- “Marriages, as well as relationships between adults and children or the rich and the poor, are proposed as spheres where we can live toward the other in the promise of our divine image. Jesus relativizes the law of God in light of the story of God. Jesus argues that God’s creational desire for integrity in our relationships remains. While Moses might have made allowances in some cases, this does not nullify God’s original intent.” – Philip Ruge-Jones.

When Jesus appears in public again, Mark reports that “*people were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them*” (10:13). Jesus had previously made an example of a little child to overturn the disciples’ arguments about which of them was the greatest (“*Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’*” – 9:36-37). This episode begins with the disciples’ attempting to enforce the standard social mores that children should not be allowed to disturb a teacher and students. Once again, this behavior shows

that the disciples do not understand the point of Jesus' ministry, which is inclusive, not exclusive. Jesus' response to this behavior leaves no doubt about his desire that all God's people are welcome in his presence: "*But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.'*" (10:14). While both Matthew and Luke offer similar accounts of this episode, only Mark describes Jesus as being "indignant" over his disciples' behavior. In welcoming children into his presence, Jesus is also making it possible for their caregivers – who would have mostly been women – to hear his teachings as well. After affirming that the reign of God belongs to children, Jesus warns his disciples that they must give up the normal human calculations of greatness if they are to participate in the rule of God: "*Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.*" (10:15). Children in Jesus' time were not considered persons in their own right; they had no status or power. Yet Jesus insists that God's rule exists for the lowly, and "*warns the disciples that they are radically dependent on God's grace – they cannot set the conditions for entering the kingdom*" (Pheme Perkins). The phrase "truly I tell you" underscores this saying's special importance: rather than hinder the children, disciples need to learn from them how to be blessed. The dependence of children, who cannot support themselves but expect and receive their support from parents, becomes a metaphor for entering the kingdom of God. It is a teaching that is "*clearly designed to function within the community of faith for the instruction of subsequent followers of Jesus.*" (Williamson).

Of the three accounts of this episode in the Synoptic Gospels, only Mark notes that Jesus blesses the children, fulfilling the desire of those who brought them: "*And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.*" (10:16). It is a reminder of the message in the beloved children's hymn, that "*Jesus loves the little children, all the little children of the world.*"

- "Despite the disciples' rebuke, Jesus lays his hands on the children. Elsewhere in Mark's gospel, the laying on of hands signifies healing. Jesus once again turns the older generation's attention to the little one in their midst. Women and children, those often hurt when divorce happens, are blessed by Jesus." – Ruge-Jones.

As a pastor, I have been privileged to preside at the marriage services of hundreds of couples over the course of my ordained ministry. The marriage celebrations have been held in church sanctuaries, county parks, family backyards, beaches at the Jersey Shore, and even at Citi Field, the home of the New York Mets. Some have been small and intimate, others large and elaborate. But what all these celebrations of marriage have had in common were the promises the couple made to each other

to enter a covenant of fidelity, to be faithful and loving to each other as long as they lived. In the marriage service from the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, I asked each of these couples that “*if it is your intention to share with each other your joys and sorrows and all that the years will bring, with your promises bind yourselves to each other as husband and wife.*” While it was a privilege to share in this joyous occasion, I have also experienced the pain of many of these couples when their marriages came to an end, when their covenant was broken and their promise to share life and love for the whole of their lives was not realized. For many of them, the pain of divorce was compounded by the guilt they often felt when they heard Jesus’ words as an accusation that they had committed adultery because their marriages did not last as God had intended. As I would walk with these couples who had experienced the brokenness of divorce, I would often encourage them to focus on Jesus’ words not as being judgmental or accusatory, but on pointing them to the gracious love of God who grieves with them and offers hope for wholeness and new beginnings. The words of the marriage service in the LBW were particularly helpful in such situations:

- “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. Because of sin, our age-old rebellion, the gladness of marriage can be overcast, and the gift of the family can become a burden. But 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.”

It was God’s intention that all human relationships should last and be sources of love and joy for all God’s people. As human sinfulness destroyed what God had intended in creation, so often do we in many circumstances – including marriage – fall short of God’s intentions for us. But as the law points us to our imperfections, the Gospel brings us the good news that in Christ Jesus there is forgiveness, restoration, renewal, and the promise of fresh starts and new beginnings. As the prodigal son was warmly welcomed home by his loving father, the Word of God is a message of welcome, of restoration, of healing, and of new possibilities for our future.

- “Once the tragedy of divorce enters the life of someone we know, our role is not to refuse them access to Jesus. Instead, we broken people are invited to be healed by the hands of Jesus. Many people will testify that our loving God has healed their broken hearts after the trauma of divorce. So, let our speaking this Sunday not rend asunder the restored heart that God has brought together.” – Ruse-Jones.

The way things are may not be the way God planned it, but God so loved the world in all its brokenness and sinfulness that he sent his only Son so that what had been broken might be restored, so that we might be born anew to a living hope through the healing, steadfast love that is ours in Jesus Christ. We are all God's children, and we are all precious in God's sight – *that's* the way God planned it!

Amen.