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Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22B)

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Text: Mark 10:2–16

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I'd like to begin today's sermon with a one-question, verbal pop quiz. What is the first of all human institutions? The first in priority and the first in sequence. Answer: marriage. Our Lutheran Confessions give this answer:

“He (i.e., God) has established it (i.e., marriage) before all others as the first of all institutions...Because of this Word (i.e., 6th commandment) it (i.e., marriage) is not a walk of life to be placed on the same level with all the others, but it is before and above them all, whether those of emperor, princes, bishops, or any other. Important as the spiritual and civil walks of life are, these must humble themselves and allow all people to enter marriage as a walk of life, as we shall hear” (LC I:207, 209).

Marriage is the first of all institutions because God created it first, in the Garden of Eden. Marriage is the first in priority because all other institutions are built upon the foundation and authority of marriage. Or to put it differently, without marriage governments crumble, children suffer, society and culture languish, the pursuit of life and liberty and justice are stunted. Yes, marriage is that important.

Today's OT reading records the creation and institution of marriage. It begins with a simple but important statement about the nature of humanity, particularly men, but true of women too. Vs. 18, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” Men and women are social creature desiring instinctively to live in larger communities rather than absolute isolation.

This shouldn't surprise us either. Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” We reflect God's Trinitarian nature. One God in three divine persons living in absolute, perfect harmony with each other. So we individual human beings desire to live in harmony with others. The highest expression of individuals living harmoniously with others is marriage. For it is not good that man should be alone.

Genesis 2 then continues to describe how marriage was created. From Adam's rib, the Lord creates Eve to be the man's wife. She shares Adam nature but is not interchangeable. She is the same yet so different. Equal in all respects but uniquely different at the same time. Adam's joyous response is vs. 23, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."

And then the next verse records the establishment of marriage, the first of all institutions, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (vs. 24). Man and woman no longer alone; man and woman now husband and wife. This is the nature of marriage. Uniqueness and individualism celebrated, not in isolation, but in the community of two united together as one flesh in heart, mind, and body. The result of such a unique union is beautifully described in vs. 25, "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." From the beginning, marriage was intended to be the first of all institutions for in it, man and woman could be themselves without shame. Naked referring to not being clothed but more profoundly, to be complete exposed as a person, being absolutely transparent with no facades or pretense. In marriage, the husband and wife can be truly themselves, transparent and exposed, with no sense of shame.

This is why our Lutheran Confessions describe marriage as the first of all institutions.

But then why has marriage suffered so much throughout human history? If marriage is as good and beneficial as I've tried to describe, then why do half of all marriages in our country end in divorce? Why are more and more young people opting to live together without marriage? Why has there been so much abuse and infidelity? Why is it being redefined in our day which suggests that something has been wrong with it throughout all of human history?

To be sure, our age has its own marital difficulties but we are hardly unique in that regard. We see it in Jesus' day too as recorded Mark 10, today's gospel reading. Vs. 2, "Pharisees came up and in order to test Jesus asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'" There were two Pharisaical schools of thought in Jesus' day. The minority opinion said divorce was permissible only if the wife had committed adultery; otherwise, no divorce. The majority opinion was that a man could divorce his wife for any reason whatsoever, the ancient form of "no-fault divorce." Women were not permitted to seek a divorce in 1st century Israel.

The Lord Jesus answers the Pharisees' question with a counter question. Vs. 3, "What did Moses command you?" The Lord is about to expose the small, sinful heart of these Pharisees. Look at their answer, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away" (vs. 4). Well, Moses talks about it so it must be ok.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. You didn't answer the question, O Pharisees. Moses permitted divorce in Deuteronomy 24—that is, he wrote a commandment, an ordinance to regulate it under a very specific set of conditions—but he never commanded divorce. That one ordinance, and it's the only ordinance in the OT, stated that the woman's husband must find and prove some "indecency" in her, which was generally understood to be adultery. Once proved, he may divorce his adulterous wife. Notice that the ordinance actual limits divorce. Moses certainly doesn't command it. Jesus, according to vs. 5, says that Moses permitted divorce because of the man's hardness of heart. Human sin causes the dissolution of marriage.

What did Moses command concerning marriage then? Jesus will answer that most important question from Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24:

⁶But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' (*Genesis 1:27*) ⁷'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.' (*Genesis 2:24*) So they are no longer two but one flesh. ⁹What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. (*These last two statements are Jesus' commentary on what Moses is teaching about marriage.*)

Moses' command is that since God created humanity male and female in the very beginning to reflect His (i.e., God's) image they are to join together as husband and wife in a one flesh union that is to endure in harmony without shame. Moses' command about marriage is not found in the post-Adamic fall legislation about a certificate of divorce found in Deut. 24 but in the days of creation described in Genesis 1 and 2. The Lord then adds His own commentary about the sanctity and blessedness of marriage by stating that this union of husband and wife is so profound that the two can no longer be considered two but one. For God Himself has joined them together.

It is this unique priority of marriage recorded by Moses and affirmed by our Lutheran Confessions that prevents us Missouri Synod Lutheran from embracing anything that reduces, redefines, or harms marriage. It is the "first of all institutions." All other walks of life, according to our Confessions, must give pride of place to marriage. That

includes spiritual vocations (i.e., pastors and clergy) and secular vocations (i.e., emperors, presidents, judges, etc.). This marital principle is so rooted in our nature that both Jesus and Paul (Matt. 19 & I Cor. 7) describe men and women who live their lives single in chastity as possessing a unique gift from God.

Marriage is the foundation upon which all societies are established. It is the proper context for the procreation and raising of children. It is not without reason that Mark describes men and women bringing children to Jesus so that He might bless them in the verses immediately following our Lord's teaching on marriage. Children suffer when marriage suffers. Human society and flourishing languishes when marriage is denigrated. Sadly, this is the present condition of our own beloved country.

Jesus teaches that divorce, the dissolution of what God has joined together, occurs as a result of sin-hardened hearts (vs. 5). The problem is not with marriage as an institution but with the men and women who enter it. Christians get divorced; some of you are divorced. The particulars are unique to each situation but the root cause is the same: sin hardened hearts.

But we never-been-divorced couples had better be careful of any kind of "better than thou" type attitude. Remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5): to lust after another person with even one look or thought is the same as adultery. We're all guilty of hardened hearts. All need forgiveness and grace won for us by Jesus in His life, death, and resurrection. There is life, abundant life, in fact, after divorce whether actual or spiritual. Jesus washes away our sins by His blood, gives us a new heart filled with His Holy Spirit, so that we can live chaste and decent lives whether single or married.

So what are we to do in support of marriage in light of the many challenges we face today? I have purposely avoided an extended harangue on the novelty of gay marriage in our times. You know the Biblical teaching and our Church's position. Marriage is for one man with one woman in lifelong fidelity. So what are we to do? Well, I began by quoting from our Lutheran Confessions. I'll end with the same. This is how we are to uphold and strengthen marriage in our times, really, any time:

"Wherever martial chastity is to be maintained, above all it is essential that husband and wife live together in love and harmony, cherishing each other wholeheartedly and with perfect fidelity. This is one of the chief ways to make chastity attractive and desirable" (LC I:219).

In other words, we support the institution of marriage by taking care of our own marriages; husbands and wives loving, honoring, and cherishing each other in fidelity. That's what makes marriage attractive and desirable. And by so doing, we reflect the very love that Christ shares with His Church.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.