

Introductory

The words of Jesus about marriage and divorce (2-12) have a parallel in Matthew (19:3- 12), who adds the notable "exception clause" to be heard by his Hebrew readers and listeners. Matthew's discussion of this topic is also more thorough than that of Mark, who writes to Romans. Matthew also has Jesus talking about marriage and divorce during the Sermon on the Mount (5:31-32.)

The account of Jesus blessing the children (13-16) has parallels in Matthew (19:13-15) and Luke (18:15-17). None of those texts is appointed to be read in the TLH one-year lectionary. In L W, Matthew 5:20-37, which includes the first, shorter saying of Jesus on marriage - actually, it's all about divorce, not marriage - is appointed to be read on Epiphany 6A, and this text is appointed for Pentecost 20B. In LSB, Matthew 5:21-37 is likewise appointed to be read on Epiphany 6A, and Luke 18:9-17 is appointed for Proper 25C.

We have noted here before how hard it is to talk about divorce to people who may be divorced, and who know people who have been divorced, and who likely think that some of those divorces were a good thing, or at least the best of bad choices. But of course that is the very reason why we *must* talk about and against divorce; it's one Law that modern Americans seem to have a hard time obeying, and probably more than we know do not necessarily think of divorce as a sin.

Good Lutheran preaching condemns sin, but does not leave it there. Good Lutheran preaching always includes the proclamation of the Gospel, and the Gospel should both end and predominate the sermon. It goes something like this; divorce is a sin against the Sixth Commandment (the Law), but Jesus died on the cross for that sin as well, and it has been forgiven, and God loves you still (the Gospel). The imagery of the love of the faithful Christ for His bride, who He will never forsake, is a good one.

We note here, and this happens often in the Bible, that talk of marriage and children go together, almost as if children will as a matter of course come as a result of marriage, and usually they do. Since we are already on the awkward subject of divorce, we may as well go ahead and encourage married couples to have children.

Might we even encourage them to have more than two? Will we go so far as to discourage the use of birth control? One thing is for certain; all other things being equal, when Lutherans are having a lot of babies, their churches are growing, and when they are not...

In today's text, the scene shifts, but the topic of greatness lingers. We have noted, over the past several weeks, how full the Twelve seem to be of themselves, and what great pains Jesus has gone to, trying to draw them back down to earth. Jesus and the rest have most recently been up north, in Capernaum.

Now they head south, a journey into Judea that would have taken a variable amount of time, depending on how fast they travelled and on in what part of Judea they end up. Looking ahead, we also note that Jesus, who has twice told His disciples that He is going to Jerusalem, is going to Jerusalem.

Textual Notes

Husband and Wife

2. Judea is thick with religious leaders and bureaucrats, and some of them seek Him out, “Καὶ προσελθόντες Φαρισαῖοι ἐπηρώτων αὐτὸν εἰ ἔξεστιν ἀνδρὶ γυναῖκα ἀπολῦσαι – and Pharisees, coming to Him, asking Him if (it is) lawful (for) a man to put away his wife.”

The theological climate of the time tempers the question, and the two verbs indicate that these men are not so much seekers of truth, but that there’s a certain edge to their question.

The theological climate of the time regarding divorce was that men were, in fact, divorcing their wives and for pretty much the same reason why men today divorce their wives. Since they have been liberated, women also divorce their husbands for various reasons. The women of that day were not liberated, so they rarely divorced their husbands. Roman women, on the other hand, who were liberated, very commonly divorced their husbands.

Unlike the Sadducees, who went to great pains to tell people that the Bible doesn’t really say what it clearly says, the Pharisees took their Bible and their religion very seriously.

Like us, they were sticklers for doctrine. Like us, they wanted the teachings of the Bible to be held and taught "in truth and purity." Like us - sometimes - they had a hard time putting their religion into practice, and often acted in a pharisaical manner.

So go the two poles of thought in that time and place about marriage. The Schools of Shammai and Hillel agreed about much, but disagreed about some things, including what constituted a “lawful” divorce. The School of Hillel allowed for divorce on the grounds of something as trivial as a burned meal, while Shammai limited the lawful cause of divorce to adultery. For more on that, see my M. Div. Thesis, found at CTSFW, 1985.

The two verbs in the sentence tell us that these men did not come to the table with a blank slate. The verb “ἐπερωτάω – to ask, demand, interrogate” appears fifty-six times in the NT, and it means to ask in a manner that has an edge to it. The first time I didn’t get the local paper delivered, I called and asked the Circulation Department what was the deal. The second time I called – this morning – my inquiry had a bit of an edge. And the third time...

Well, let’s hope there isn’t a third time. The second verb indicates that they in fact come not so much as seekers of truth, but “πειράζοντες αὐτόν – testing Him. These men were not seeking information; an answer to their question, but were indeed trying to trap Jesus into saying something regrettable, much like reporters will often do with athletes and politicians and like children will do with adults.

The third verb is the aorist infinitive of “ἀπολύω,” a word that often means to "set free," but in this context it means "to send away.” It is a word that was commonly used to refer to what we would call “divorce,” as in “he divorced her.” The expectation here is that Jesus would choose to follow either the School of Shammai or the School of Hillel.

He could have answered their question by listing just causes for divorce, but He doesn’t. Instead He gives an answer that is both thorough and clear, in essence telling them that marriage

is until death do you part, and to stop divorcing their wives.

3. When asked this legal question, Jesus turns first to the Great Law Giver, Moses, asking them, "Τί ὑμῖν ἐνετείλατο Μωϋσῆς – what did Moses command you?" This is a very effective way of dealing with people who ask questions not because they are serious inquirers, but instead are asking a question to test you. Right back at you, Pharisees.

I am unable to find the subject of divorce spoken in Moses until the twenty-second chapter of Deuteronomy (19, 29), where the command is given forbidding a man to put away his wife. We do find several instances of multiple marriages – maybe that helps to explain it – but once a man took a wife, he did not divorce her. I suppose you could say that there may have been divorce, but Moses didn't tell us about it, but he does tell us about it happening, after the Exodus.

4. And that's what the Pharisees are thinking as they attempt to draw Jesus into the hot-button social issue of the day; under what circumstances can a man legally send his wife away, out of the house, into the wild, divorce her? They said to Him, "Ἐπέτρεψεν Μωϋσῆς βιβλίον ἀποστασίου γράψαι καὶ ἀπολῦσαι – Moses allowed to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away."

The verbs "to write" and "divorce" are aorist infinitives, one time acts, with emphasis on the acts. The Pharisees are thinking about what Deuteronomy says about divorce, but as we will soon find out, Jesus is here thinking of Genesis 2, where God establishes the institution of marriage, and clearly divorce is not to be a part of marriage.

5. In response to their quoting of the OT, "ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς Πρὸς τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν ἔγραψεν ὑμῖν τὴν ἐντολὴν ταύτην – Jesus said to them, 'because of the hardness of your hearts he commanded that.'" Thayer, quoted at biblos.com, says of the conjunction "ὁ δὲ" that it is "universally, by way of opposition and distinction; it is added to statements opposed to a preceding statement." It's like Him saying "I disagree" or "you're wrong."

The preposition "Πρὸς;" followed by a noun in the accusative case indicates motion towards. Jesus is here very graphically depicting the allowance to divorce as expressed in Deuteronomy as being directed straight at the hard hearts of men, and any man who would do that to a woman, especially in that day, would have had to have been cold, as well as hard hearted.

By using the pronoun "ὑμῶν" and then "ὑμῖν," (plural "you"), He makes it clear that He's talking not only about hardhearted people in the time of Moses, but He's talking about them, and by extension He's talking about these Pharisees. These days, we might use the term "hard heart" to refer to somebody who is cold and calculating, or lacking emotion, or who seems to enjoy being nasty to people.

The term may well come up when talking about a particular participant in a particular divorce. But when Jesus uses word "σκληροκαρδίαν" in reference to "you," it's much, much worse. You remember who had the "hard heart" in the OT, don't you? He was not a nice man. For several chapters of the Book of Exodus, God "hardens" the heart of Pharaoh, and Pharaoh "hardens" his own heart.

Twice in the OT (1 Samuel 6:6 and Ps 95:8) and three times in the NT (Hebrews 3:8, 15, 4:7), people are warned against hardening the heart. To use *that* term, connected as it was to the Pharaoh - and comparisons of Egypt at that time to Iran of this time would not be inappropriate - would have stung these men to the very core of their theological being.

6. Now He goes to the end of the second chapter of Genesis, "ἀπὸ δὲ ἀρχῆς κτίσεως ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς – from the of creation male and female He made them." Sodomy was not unknown in the ancient world, and in places like Greece it was very prevalent. While Jesus is clearly going somewhere with this, it seems like an odd thing to point out the obvious; God made the first humans to be male and female.

You almost wonder if that phrase is a subtle reminder that, as the saying goes, "it was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." Whether or not we are subtle or blunt, given that our people are constantly bombarded with just the opposite, and even that Steve would be a better partner than Eve for Adam, and who are often held up to scorn because of what we believe on this issue, we must make this same point from the pulpit on this Sunday especially, and at other times as well.

7. In light of the fact; that God created the male and the female, "a man will leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife." The modern translations use American words like "joined" and "united" to translate the verb "προσκολλάω" and that's okay, as long as we understand that the word occurs only here and in Ephesians 5 :31 (in reference to the marriage bond) and that it means literally "glued towards."

That's a much stronger word than "join" or "unite," I will stick with "cleave." According to dictionary.com, when the word "cleave" is used without the object, it means "to adhere closely, stick," and when it is used with an object, it means the opposite; "to split or divide." I will stick with it because it is the word that the Church has historically used to describe the marriage bond, which is much stronger than "join" or "unite."

Have you ever glued two pieces of paper together and then tried to separate those glued pieces into the original two? How about gluing together a couple of 2 X 4s with strong glue, and then trying to separate them? If you think you're going to end up with the original two pieces of paper or wood, think again. Divorce is like that. And it's also like ripping your own flesh off of your own body. That's never a good thing.

8. Continuing to quote from Genesis, He talks about how "καὶ ἔσονται οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν – two will be into one flesh," a prepositional phrase indicating motion into. Then He says pretty much the same thing, only more emphatic, "ὥστε οὐκέτι εἰσὶν δύο ἀλλὰ μία σὰρξ – so (therefore) they are no longer two, but one." The marriage bond is a bond like none other.

A man and a woman live in the same house, see a lot of each other, and have a lot of shared experiences, including but not limited to children. And then there's the whole sexual thing going on. Things like loyalty and mutual trust strengthen the bond through the years, and if romantic love is part of the mix, then so much the better.

Use the imagery that God uses in the Bible to talk about marriage, and to talk about how painful divorce is even in the best of circumstances. Sometimes it's just hard to watch, isn't it? In pre-marital and in preaching, I will invite the hearer to imagine what it must be like to have one of your limbs tom off, or to have a chunk of flesh cleaved out of your body, and if they feel uncomfortable and make a face, then that's what we're shooting for.

Divorce is like that, and the longer the two people have been together and grown together marriage, the more painful is the ripping apart of flesh that has been one and is now tom. This might be a good time to pro-actively talk about the nuts and bolts of keeping a marriage together, giving positive encouragement along with the discouragement to divorce.

9. Now He contrasts the work of God, who is said to bring husband and wife together, with the work of man, who may work to rip them apart; “ὁ οὖν ὁ Θεὸς συνέζευξεν, ἄνθρωπος μὴ χωριζέτω – what therefore God has joined together, let not a man separate.” The verb for the work that God does in joining those two people is συνέζευξεν, a word that occurs only twice in the NT, here and in Matthew's parallel to this.

It means "yoke together," and is the common word for marriage, and gives us yet another picture of man and woman working together, side by side, and not against one another. Indeed, the picture of a farmer and his wife working together on the farm and in the fields is a picture not far removed from many of your hearers, some of whom still do that on the farm or in a business co-owned and co-run by them.

The verb for ripping them apart is "χωριζέτω," a verb used thirteen times in the NT, and it is used to refer to physical separation, or leaving. To state the obvious; when one person leaves another person, they become separated. At a base level, “a man” is the husband, who is able to put his wife away and cause separation, but should not.

This is also a warning to men and women not to seduce another's wife or husband. When you take it upon yourself to do that, you are causing great pain to the spouse and to the family that is involved, and you are breaking something that is not man-made, but made by God. The home-wrecker used to be vilified, and he should be. My wife's family was devastated, and still feel the pain of the father who left them for another woman – a friend of the family.

Often these days the husband or the wife - it seems like it's usually the wife - will decide that he is not happy or just doesn't love this person anymore or simply is tired of being married and wants to do something different, and will want to divorce. But there are still plenty of cases - it's usually the husband - where a third party is involved. If a husband or a wife does not want to go to counseling, in all likelihood it's because they have already found another person, and already rejected the spouse.

Many believe that two people who "love" each other ought to be together, even if it means wrecking a home or two, and will encourage friends and even relatives to do just that. Such a mindset bespeaks a society that largely does not believe in an afterlife, and is going to get his or hers here, come hell or high water, and they will believe in the afterlife only after they get there, and when they arrive there they find out that it's not at all high water.

10. Now back into the house, in private, and the disciples have follow-up questions. Matther speaks more thoroughly about them. They asked Him "οἱ μαθηταὶ περὶ τούτου ἐπηρώτων αὐτόν – about this same thing," i.e. marriage. They discern that Jesus is saying that there is no good reason to divorce, and that's hard, and maybe it's better not to marry, that being the case.

11. To clarify, using a couple of verbs in the subjunctive mood, He puts forth the following hypothetical, and connects for them the dots of a very basic syllogism, saying, "Ὅς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην, μοιχᾶται ἐπ' αὐτήν whomever under any circumstance should divorce his wife, and should marry another, commits adultery.”

Some of the Lutherans have hopelessly complicated these very perspicuous words. Marriage is for life, and even if you divorce your wife, you are still married to her, and even if you have relations with another woman in the context of a second marriage, you are still married to the first woman, and therefore your sleeping with the second is adultery against the first, who is and always will be the one wife allotted to each man in a lifetime - except if she dies.

That's the Law. Don't forget to preach the Gospel.

12. This verse is equally clear in stating that the converse is also true; if a woman should divorce her husband and marry another, it is adultery. We note here that, while it was not at all common for women in first century Palestine to divorce men - and Matthew does not quote Jesus saying this verse - as noted above, such occurrences were extremely commonplace in first century Rome, in all classes, especially among the upper classes.

While Hearth and Home had been the foundation of the Roman Republic, those days were long gone by now, and if such a thing can be imagined, the Romans in the day of Jesus had a lower regard for marriage than the modern Americans, but the Americans may catch them yet. It was not common, but neither was it uncommon for people to have marriages in the double digits, and to divorce and remarry for the most trivial of reasons.

The Children

13. It does not exactly say who "they" are, but “προσέφερον αὐτῷ παιδία ἵνα αὐτῶν ἅψηται – they brought to Him children, so that He should touch them.” Matthew and Luke are also not specific about “they,” but in Nestle-Aland Luke (18:15) – there's a variant reading – tells us that they were “infants.” That word, “βρέφη” is used by Luke, the doctor (1:41, 44) to speak of John the Baptizer while he is still in the womb of Elizabeth

He later uses that word (2:12) in reference to the newborn Jesus. These children were not ambulatory, and it is unlikely that they came by their own volition, and it is very likely that they would have been brought by a parent or other family member. It does not seem at all likely that a non-family person would deem it appropriate to bring an infant to Jesus. It just wasn't that person's place.

However, the fact that none of the synoptic writers tell us exactly who "they" are, and that all three are very non-specific, it places the focus on the children, not the adults, and that's where the focus of Jesus is. Fundamentally, this episode is not about the adults, but about the children brought to Jesus by the adults. In the same way, when a child is brought to Jesus at the baptismal font, it's about the child, not about the parents.

Not that it's a bad thing for the adults to do. The infant twins I baptized yesterday would not have made it to church without their parents, and until they get a driving license, they are dependent upon adults to get them to church. That generally ends up being the parents, but grandparents in many cases have always helped out with that. We took our grandchild to church yesterday; otherwise she wouldn't have made it.

And when the adults brought the children to Jesus, so that Jesus could touch them, the disciples strongly corrected them. Anabaptists and "confessional" Lutheran pastors will sometimes do this same sort of thing. The Anabaptist does turn children away from the baptismal font, and will correct his parents who want to have their baby baptized for theological reasons. I'm not sure why “confessional” Lutheran pastors do that.

The axiom they espouse is “as soon as you baptize somebody, you become that person's

pastor.” Such an idea is patently silly on several levels. I became the pastor of several hundred people, few of whom I have baptized, when I was installed at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Grand Mound, Iowa. Previous to that, I was not their pastor, but now I am, and I became that when I was installed.

I have baptized many people in my thirty year ministry, to most of whom I am not their pastor. The people I baptized in Burnett, Wisconsin, Farley, Missouri, and Pittsburg, Kansas have other men shepherding them, who are their respective pastors, not me. If it really were the case that “as soon as you baptize somebody, you become that person’s pastor,” then I would still be pastor to all of those people in all of those places. But it’s not.

I can think of no Baptism recorded in the NT – from John to Jesus to the Twelve to Paul to Phillip – where the baptizer became pastor to the baptized. In fact, in the Baptisms I’m thinking of, a lot of times the baptizer never saw the baptized again. Do we really think John the Baptizer became “pastor” to that throng? In all likelihood Phillip never laid eyes on the Ethiopian eunuch again – after he baptized him.

In a world where many people don’t want themselves or their children to be baptized, and where others openly persecute those who do that, when somebody wants to be baptized or have his child baptized, I’m probably going to do that. I’m probably going to do that because there’s something there with that person, and more to the point there’s something there in Christian Baptism – review Luther’s Small Catechism as needed.

I get it; you just got your books cleaned up and you don’t want to take in the riff-raff who don’t come to church, but who want their babies baptized, and who probably won’t be in church after the baby is baptized, but is that really what it means to be a Pastor? To have the books cleaned up? If you don’t want to go after the lost sheep, then maybe you shouldn’t be a shepherd. If you want all sheep to have the same outward devotion, sorry, that’s not the way it works.

But in doing that, they are following in the footsteps of these disciples. When they brought children to Jesus so that He might touch them, “οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ ἐπετίμησαν αὐτοῖς – the disciples rebuked them.” The verb indicates not so much a gentle shooing as it indicates a blunt direction to leave at once, and what do you think you’re doing here, and who do you think you are? Now get out of here, and don’t come back. The translations that say that the disciples “scolded” or “sternly told them to leave” are good, but in preaching I will probably explain the meaning of the verb using sentences like the one penultimate to this sentence.

14. Jesus saw it, and “ἰδὼν δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἠγανάκτησεν – seeing, He was angry.” The translations that have Jesus being “indignant” fall short, if only in the regard that the word “indignant” doesn’t really mean anything, like the word “offended” doesn’t really mean anything and using words that don’t mean anything is a waste of time and ought to be avoided.

If we look at the word the other six time that it occurs in the NT, we see that it has connotations of one being surprised and even stunned by what he is observing, temporarily unable to get His Divine Head around what He sees, sort of like that time when one of my Kansas sheep used the “N” word in casual conversation. Are you kidding me right now?

Unlike me, who was so stunned to hear that word that I didn’t really know what to say, so I said nothing, Jesus responds to what he is seeing by saying, “Ἀφετε τὰ παιδιά ἔρχεσθαι πρὸς με,

μὴ κωλύετε αὐτά – let go the children coming to me and stop forbidding them.” The first verb may or may not mean that they were physically restraining them. It’s a word often used for “forgive” and for the letting go – physically – of a fisherman’s nets.

That verb is in the imperative mode – a command – as is the command to stop forbidding the children. The command has the negator "μὴ," followed by the verb in the present imperative form, means to cease doing what you are presently doing, "stop forbidding them," and then He gives them the reason why; " τῶν γὰρ τοιούτων ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ - to them is the Kingdom of God.”

The verb “to belong” is nowhere to be found in this verse, yet almost every single English translation I’m looking uses “belong” to translate ἐστὶν, the verb of being. It’s not that they “belong” to the Kingdom – which they do – but it’s that they are the Kingdom. The next verse makes it clear that the very essence of the Kingdom is children and people whose mindset towards God the Father is like that of these children.

15. To us, such a thing makes perfect sense, but it must have been an astonishing thing for them to have heard, they who had of late been thinking so highly of themselves. In the hearing of others, He tells them, " ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ὃς ἂν μὴ δέξηται τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ ὡς παιδίον, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃ εἰς αὐτήν – truly, I say to you, whoever anyway should not receive the Kingdom of God like a child, no no will enter into it.”

Not bringing an object from home, but using an object that is currently there – brought to Him by others – the one who receives the Kingdom in the manner of the children here presented to Him, who are clearly passive recipients, is the one who receives the Kingdom. This contrasts with the way that the Twelve have lately been regarding self. It hasn’t been that long ago that they were ranking self and one another as “greater” or not.

16. And Jesus "ἐναγκαλισάμενος αὐτὰ κατευλόγει τιθεὶς τὰς χεῖρας ἐπ’ αὐτά. – having taken them into his arms, was blessing them, laying hands on them." The first verb is an aorist participle form of a compound word that means "take into arms." First He does that, He simply wraps His arms around them, and then "He was blessing them," a verb is in the imperfect tense, meaning repeated or continuous action.

The last verb is a present participle, "laying hands on them," like we do when we baptize children, and like we do when we confirm children, a remembrance of their Baptism. He does that to and for the children, whom some adults had brought, whom other adults had sought to stop, none of whom ends up getting blessed by Jesus. Just the children.

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, IA

Resources

ACC - Manlio Simonetti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Mark).
Intervarsity Press, 2002

BAG - Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Translated by
William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, University of Chicago Press, 1979

BCL Y - William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*. The Westminster Press, 1975