

Marriage and the Hard Heart



Co-missioners,

Our editor, Jerry Burce, is still the full-time pastor he was when took up with Crossings two decades ago. Much of his theological work spills out in the sermons he preaches at Messiah Lutheran Church in Fairview Park, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. Here's one from the Sunday before last. We pass it along with his own brief introduction.

On another note, are you looking forward yet to next January's seminar on "The Promising Community"? We hope so! If you read our last few Thursday Theology posts, you already know that Dr. Mary Shore of the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary and Dr. Kit Kleinhans of Trinity Lutheran Seminary are two of the

keynote speakers. The third is the brilliant young pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Robin Lütjohann by name. He found his way to Crossings a few years ago and has been using its resources ever since to help convey the promise to a generation that hasn't really heard it before and can't imagine it either. But then who of us can imagine it unless someone is there to fill our ears with real-deal Gospel? Robin, we guess, will be telling us how he does this. Another gift to look forward to.

Here's [the link to register now](#).

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

Marriage and the Hard Heart: Law and Gospel in Mark 10:2-16 A Sermon

by Jerome Burce

Introduction

Mark 10:2-16 was the text for the second sermon I was assigned to preach as a twenty-three-year-old vicar—a seminary intern as

others say. The year was 1976. To say I sweated that sermon is an absurd understatement. I was all of two and a half months married, already long enough to have grasped that no honest husband can assert a pristine righteousness where marriage is concerned. Worse, of course, was knowing that I was preaching to a congregation that included some divorced people, a few in subsequent marriages. Jesus calls such people adulterers in this text. Doubtless all of us noticed this on October 3 of this year, 2021, when we heard it in church again. The word still stings, if not as badly as in the seventies when certain congregations in the Lutheran sub-tradition I belonged to at the time were known to excommunicate the divorced on these very grounds. "Adultery. Not to be tolerated in the church of God. Jesus said so." Or so it was said.

The other issue, as rampant now as it was then, is the temptation this text poses to the steadfastly married. It can't help but incite the inner Pharisee, as in the fellow who prayed in the temple with one eye on the tax collector who was there too. "I thank thee, Lord, that I'm not like them." Thus the stubborn survivors as they think of the folks they passed on the way into church whose marriages didn't make it. I recall working very hard in that first sermon to make sure the heat of the Law was being spread around to everybody. "No peeking over your shoulder to spot the sinners. No noses in the air. If you haven't blown it before God in your marriage, you're certainly blowing it in some other aspect of this life you have to answer for." A fat lot of good it did to push this line. "You really told 'em today, Vicar," said someone as he shook my hand on his way out. That was my first slap-in-the-face lesson about the selective hearing that happens in pews as a matter of course. Our Lord wrestled with the same problem. We're hearing a lot about it this fall as we watch Peter and company bumble behind him on the way toward Jerusalem.

I don't recall how I delivered the Gospel in that long ago sermon. I suspect I under-pitched it. I was still so very young—still trapped in the illusion of the young that a reasonable level of righteousness is within our grasp if we stretch for it. Doesn't God insist on this? It took a while before the gut grasped what the head already knew: God can insist till he's blue in the face and we'll never deliver. God knows this, of course, and keeps insisting anyway. At some point it can drive a person to discover what Christ is really here for.

This year's handling of the marriage-and-divorce text springs from that subsequent learning, stretched out over forty-plus years and still ongoing. I dare to share it with you on the strength of some appreciate notes I got from others. Not that it's a model sermon—anything but, with lots of improving that could be done. Still, if it should nonetheless be of help to some young preachers three years from now, God be praised.

A reminder before you read that Mark 10:2-16 comprises two distinct episodes. The first is Jesus' discussion about divorce with the Pharisees who come "to test him." The second is his encounter with mothers who want their children blessed. Both episodes are familiar enough that I won't bother to reproduce the text here, observing merely that there's a reason Mark puts the episodes back-to-back. See below.

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Sermon on Mark 10:2-16 with reference to Genesis 2.

Delivered on October 2, 2016

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

The passage I read just now comes in two parts, first the hard

part, packed with high and holy expectations for married people, and then the gracious part, the one that shows us the generosity of God at its most lavish and extreme. That's the part we need to start with. Otherwise we'll get the rest of it wrong the way Christians have been doing for the past two thousand years. And when we go home or click the computer off we'll have missed the point completely, and God will be grieved because our hearts are still so very, very hard—so closed to God, that is, to say nothing of our neighbors.

So with this in mind as the danger to avoid this morning, Part Two of the text—Jesus and the little children. Notice, please, what you and I are seeing here. This is nothing less than God, the Lord and Maker of heaven and earth in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. There he is, down on his knees in the dirt he fashioned us from. Little children are running up to him. One by one he scoops them up, he lays his hands on them, he blesses them—that is, he lays a word on each of them, a word that is good and true and powerful. It drips with promise. With a word like that from a person like this, you are a child going somewhere.

And notice now how Jesus hugs and blesses these children with no hesitation, and absolutely no exception. It doesn't matter what shape or condition the child is in, whether it's laughing or crying, clean or dirty, bold or shy; whether it's beaming with health or dripping with mucus and scratching at the lice in its hair the way kids did in the country where I grew up. All this is beside the point. The only thing that matters on this particular afternoon is that God Almighty loves this child beyond all understanding and with a grace, a generosity, that takes our breath away.

And please, one other thing you must notice. Notice how this scene is playing out this very morning in churches all around

the world, ours included. Whenever I talk to children about Holy Communion I point out to them how this is the way Jesus touches us today; how he wraps his arms around children just like them the world over. Here he blesses them, their parents too, with a word that kicks the door open to a fantastic, impossible future—the body of Christ, given for you: imagine that. Really, imagine that!

And notice please how this is said to every person who approaches, no exceptions, without the slightest hesitation. This is God in Christ, the true Prodigal Son: God the spendthrift being profligate with his grace all over again. He doesn't care whether I'm rich or poor, healthy or sick, smart or stupid. He doesn't check the records to see how many commandments I broke last week, and to what degree I broke them. He doesn't ask what reputation I have, be it good or awful, with the people I live and work with. And these days, in this country, there's also this bit of astonishment: he doesn't ask about my politics or my views about masks. Why should he ask? He knows what these are; and I'm certain he has some very firm and divine opinions on what he knows. Yet see how he bucks the terrible tide in America at the moment; how once again he does what others refuse to do; how he sets his opinions aside and loves us all with the same gush of love that leads at last to life and to joy. "The blood of Christ, shed for you." Not for some of you, but for all of you.

And this, by the way, includes all of you no matter how you were feeling as you sat there listening to the first part of this morning's Gospel reading.

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So bearing this in mind, let's look at the passage—Jesus talking about marriage and divorce, first with Pharisees out in the open, and then, behind closed doors, with his disciples.

First observation: what a mess the church has made of this over the centuries. People my age or older have all heard stories about pastors who told desperate women that they absolutely had to hang in there with an abusive husband because divorce is not allowed.

*What God has
joined together
let man not separate.
Mark 10:9*

In fact, it is allowed. It says so plainly in this text, where Jesus' opponents point to a passage in Deuteronomy that permits a man to divorce his wife; and Jesus agrees—that's what it says.

But then Jesus goes on to point out the obvious—obvious that is to most any bride and groom on their wedding night, whether they go to church or not, whether they believe in God or not. Obvious as well to any father who has ever walked his daughter down the aisle, to any mother who has ever dabbed tears of joy from her eyes as she sits there watching. And later, of course, it becomes just as obvious—more so, even—to the children of that marriage.

What's obvious is that marriages are meant to last. They're not

supposed to end in divorce, any more than a job, say, is meant to end in getting fired. This is how God designed it.

But stuff happens, doesn't it; and when the stuff that happens—the sin that happens, to put it bluntly—is more than a person can cope with or endure, then yes, there's an out. An out that God permits, not because it's right, but because God is merciful. This again is stating the obvious. I don't know of a person who has ever taken that out who looks back on it later with pride and joy. With relief—yes; but also with sorrow and regret, and often with embarrassment, the kind of embarrassment that Christ our Savior died to take away.

Christians, I'm afraid, have not had a good record of being Christ-like in responding to broken marriages. We don't do mercy very well. We're even worse at grace and love. We'd rather prance and preen about how righteous we are in comparison to “those other people”—and shame on us for saying it that way, or even thinking to say it that way.

Yes, marriages are meant to last; what God has joined together let no one separate; and when the separation happens anyway, let everyone remember that here is Christ, come to wrap us all regardless in the healing love of God—again, not some us, but all of us.

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Which brings us at last to the real issue in this passage. Jesus puts his finger on it in the opening phrase of his answer to the Pharisees. “Because of your hardness of heart Moses wrote this commandment for you.”

Hardness of heart. It's a malady that every person here this morning is suffering from in one way or another.

Lots of you, I think, have heard of something called hardening

of the arteries. It's an incurable condition that interferes with the movement of blood through the body, or so I understand. The medical term for it, borrowed from ancient Greek, is arteriosclerosis, where sclerosis means hardening.

It would help, I think, if we would start to use a medical term for the condition Jesus refers to. Hardness of heart. Cardiosclerosis. Talking about it that way would remind us of a couple of things. First, it is a disease. A deadly disease. Second, it's incurable. The only thing that can save you from it is a miracle done by God.

Cardiosclerosis is a condition that makes it impossible for a heart to love the way God created hearts to love.

Today's first reading is about God making human beings with hearts designed to love—first a man, then a woman. You find this especially in a verse that the editors chopped off from the end of the reading. Why they did that, I don't know. It goes like this: the man and his wife were naked, and they were not ashamed.

Think about that: the two were naked--exposed to the other, entirely open to the other, nothing hidden from the other, nothing concealed either on the surface or under the surface where our thoughts do their dancing, and still, the two were not ashamed to let the other see them this way—so openly, so thoroughly and clearly.

Why weren't they ashamed? Because their hearts were healthy.

Why weren't they ashamed? Because they weren't finding fault with each other. Why weren't they finding fault? Because there were no faults to find, yes; but more to the point, it didn't cross their minds to go looking for faults in the first place. God had said of them both that they were good, very good in

fact, and that was enough. They trusted God *about* each other.

Trusting God: that's what having a healthy heart is all about. And because their hearts were healthy, these two weren't standing around judging each other or feeling as though the other was judging them. No wonder they weren't ashamed, naked as they were.

Later they both came down with a fatal case of cardiosclerosis and passed it on to their descendants. These days we're all in the judging and fault-finding business. It doesn't help that all of us have plenty of faults for others to find. We're used to this. We take it so for granted, that like the Pharisees in the story, we'll even make it our business to find fault with God. That's what these characters are doing when they come along to pick at Jesus—to test him, as Mark says.

How does Jesus finally respond to them? Go figure: he dies for them. He dies for us too so that God's final verdict on each one of us will be a grand version of what we see in that picture of Jesus scooping those urchins into his arms, one after the other. He ignores their dirt, their lice, their whining—their sin. He loves them all in spite of it. He loves them with a promise to



And all of you are in on this

s. Again: the body of Christ given for you. The arms of God in Jesus wrapping themselves around you in spite of your faults, your sin.

Another reason Jesus died was to open the door for the Holy Spirit to do what the Holy Spirit is doing today. This is the Lord and Giver of life, as we say in the creed. The doctor of doctors. We could say it that way too. His immediate goal is to get hard hearts loosened up and pumping again with trust in God.

Every marriage I've ever known is afflicted to one degree or another with this stuff of the hardened heart—the nit-picking, the fault-finding, the simmering dissatisfaction. The fear of

being too naked. The urge to cover up what you don't want the other to see. Lots of us power through this. Others don't or can't. The fault is just too big. The point is that none of us has a marriage that measures up to God's original design. Let no one kid themselves about this.

What we do have is Christ. And what we also have is the Holy Spirit pushing us to trust the word of Christ about us all. He calls us forgiven. He calls us his brothers, his sisters. He says this of me. He says it of my spouse, or my former spouse as the case may be. He says it of people I like and people I detest. He invites us all to love each other as Christ has loved us all.

We will never do this perfectly, not in this life we won't. But for Jesus' sake—my goodness—let's give it a try, beginning with our nearest and dearest. How could we not when God gives us a Lord and Savior as good as Jesus is?

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your minds and hearts in Christ Jesus.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use

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