Text:Mark 10:2-16 (Matt 19 Parallel)

**Introduction**

I prefer the Matthew 19 parallel to our gospel reading today from Mark 10. But for some reason our lectionary builders didn’t include it in three years of readings. So, I’m just going to freely import a few things along the way. You can look it up in the full context later. Matthew includes a couple of other parts that I think are helpful. One of those is Jesus’ last line. “Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.” Which I think might be best glosses as “I know a huge number of you can’t or won’t hear this, but it’s the truth.”

**Text**

In both Matthew and Mark there are really three audiences to what Jesus says. There are the Pharisees, the disciples, and those hearing it of other times and places. And all three groups have trouble receiving what Jesus says. The Pharisees ask Jesus a question, but their question is simply meant as an academic test. Maybe more than an academic test, as a way to try and pin Jesus down and skinny down his crowds. In the midst of a political season we might say they wanted to drive up his negatives. So they ask him a question that was highly polarized in the day. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” The Overton Window of the day – the range of acceptable opinion – was always yes, but with some slightly different modifications. Rabbi Hillel was the head of one of the polarities. His famous phrase was “you can divorce you wife for burned toast.” You did not have to give a reason. Rabbi Shammai was the other pole. He held that yes you could divorce, but you had to have a good reason. That good cause was typically adultery, but there might be other good reasons depending upon your rabbi.

Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees does two things. The first thing is that Jesus takes it completely out of the bloodless legal setting imposed by the Pharisees. He asks them back, “what did Moses command you?” And they respond back to him rather flatly, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” But please notice that this doesn’t sound like a direct quote, but an interpretation. It’s based on Deuteronomy 24:1-4. And if you go an read that passage, you would quickly notice a difference. It is not like the 10 commandments “You shall not….”. Neither is it “The LORD your God commands you this days…” like a few others. If starts out “when a man takes a wife and marries her” and continues with a couple of “ifs”. It’s like reading the Federal Register of regulations. Which is what it really is. Moses, out of what Jesus says was his understanding of “the hardness of your hearts” created a regulation around something that he knew would happen. And Hillel and Shammai and the Pharisees demanding Jesus answer their question are just continuing an argument over regulations. Are we Laissez-Faire or do we treat divorce like a nuclear utility. And Jesus is having none of that discussion.

Jesus takes it back to the natural law. What do I mean by the natural law? Those things so basic that we all know them in our bones. Things so clear that because of the hardness of our hearts we’d rather cover them up with regulations and bloodless discussions. Because if you asked anyone who has ever been through a divorce, nobody would recommend it. There are reasons why they happen. After they are over, sometimes things are better. But usually everyone knows something has been broken that can’t be fixed. And that is what Jesus turns his answer toward. “From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female…and the two become one flesh…and what God has but together, man can’t separate.” If you allow yourself to admit the deep magic, the answer to the question “can you divorce” is no. Jesus obliterates the polarity and the acceptable opinion answers. And he does it with an answer that is simply unacceptable to our hard hearts.

It is also unacceptable to his disciples, because as soon as they get him in the house they ask him again. Jesus, about this divorce thing, you can’t really mean it, right? Matthew’s record of this conversation I think captures some of its tone. Essentially, “Jesus, if that is really your teaching on marriage, it is better not to marry.” Which is a popular modern answer. We will just shack up. All the benefits of marriage without its potential downsides. And I’m confident that was what the disciples meant. To which Jesus replies that there are eunuchs since birth, and man-made eunuchs, and eunuchs for the kingdom. Which cuts off what those disciples were thinking. Sexuality is properly understood as a part of marriage. And if you are swearing off marriage because you can’t divorce, it is not that sexuality should be practiced outside of it, but that you have made yourself a eunuch.

I’ve often heard people in our day who have trouble receiving this, say something like “Jesus never said anything about \_\_\_\_”. Insert your favorite marriage or pelvic issue. And all that means is that they have never really heard Jesus. They are like the pharisees wanting to get into some type of legal discussion hoping to find a loophole. Because Jesus’ appeal to the natural law is exceedingly clear.

Marriage is the defining fact. And marriage is between the male and the female.

Marriage is something that we humans have a natural ability to enter into, but it is blessed or created by God. God does the joining. Even if the man and wife don’t believe in Him.

And all of our pelvic issues flow from our inability to receive this. When we take the marriage act outside of marriage we create an unending list of things that require a new Moses to regulate. All of which we know in our bones are against the way it was made.

**Christology**

But Moses wasn’t exactly wrong. We are hard of heart. And even Jesus knew that this would not be universally received. What do we do?

I think this is a place where Luther’s law and gospel understanding is not just helpful, but necessary.

First, we cannot deny the law. At least not and continue to claim Christ. And this is the big reason. Marriage is continually the metaphor that God uses between himself and his people. Marriage is the icon, the image, the picture of Christ and the church. Everybody’s favorite Old Testament story of Ruth and her Kinsman Redeemer Boaz is a picture of what Christ has done for the church. Now pause for a second and imagine if Christ decided that he didn’t like the church anymore and wished to divorce her. I hope a shiver went down you spine. A gasp of “no. that can’t be.” And it can’t. It isn’t. Because God has pledged himself in this way. He has given his people his kesed – his steadfast love or covenant faithfulness. And God is always faithful. Our icons, our images of God’s faithfulness might break. But the reality does not. For God so loved us. If we deny that deep magic, we deny Christ. If we cannot hear his teaching on divorce, we do not understand the love of God.

But while the law is good and wise, the law is not the purpose of our creation. The law is a description of the way things typically go better for us, but God does not need law keeping machines. Which is good, because we are pretty bad machines. Our purpose is to know God. To know his kesed – his steadfast love and covenant faithfulness.

We can be pharisees attempting to argue loopholes and justify ourselves. All of which is ultimately meaningless. A missing of the deep magic. Or we can admit that we fail. That we break things. Sometimes we break really important and irreplaceable things. And all we can do is lean into the grace of Christ. And in his love God might create something more glorious. Like those wound which in glory look something completely different. In beauty glorified. May the love of God cover our self-inflicted wounds and bring us to that type of glory. Because that is really the start of living the gospel. Ending our legal war of the Roses and accepting that God loves sinners.

**Moral**

None of which is an excuse to go sin more.

The love of God covers sin. But each sin is one more that is placed on the cross of our beloved. Each sin is one more step away from the path that we were created to walk in. Each on strains the bonds of the Spirit.

The world will continue to walk its own way. But you have been called out of that mess. Your redeemer has come and called you to a still more excellent way. A way of love that the world knows nothing about.

**Eschatological**

Today, the love of the world and the love of the Kingdom exist side by side. Hard hearts and open ears. Foolishness tempts and Lady wisdom calls. Today we live with cracked icons and imperfect images. And all the trouble that brings.

But tomorrow the bridegroom comes. Tomorrow the wedding feast opens.

Today is the day to prepare. Today is the day to receive the invitation.

Tomorrow, the perfect comes. And we will no long need icons, because the place of God will be with his people.

Don’t find yourself so engrossed in the things of this world, that you turn down that invitation for all our hard trivial reasons. And find the door closed.

Soften your hearts, and receive the invitation to the wedding feast.