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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, May 1, 2024  
Matthew 19:1-15

HOLY GOSPEL ..... Matthew 19:1-15, RSV  
*Last week we read about forgiveness. Now we read the teaching of Jesus about divorce. Also, he blesses the little children.*

*Before the Gospel:*

☞ The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew, the Nineteenth Chapter:

☛ **Glory to you, O Lord.**

<sup>1</sup>Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan; <sup>2</sup>and large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

<sup>3</sup>And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” <sup>4</sup>He answered, “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, <sup>5</sup>and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? <sup>6</sup>So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.”

<sup>7</sup>They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?” <sup>8</sup>He said to them, “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. <sup>9</sup>And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery.”

<sup>10</sup>The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry.” <sup>11</sup>But he said to them, “Not all men can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. <sup>12</sup>For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it.”

<sup>13</sup>Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people; <sup>14</sup>but Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” <sup>15</sup>And he laid his hands on them and went away.

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

From a moral point of view... that is, from the perspective of what is good and true and lovely in a human life, we should be grateful for the clarity of our Lord’s teaching about gender, marriage, and divorce. I propose this rule for us: We should judge the truth of the Gospel according to the teaching of Jesus.

It is not right to judge the truth of the Gospel according to whether it fits with our pre-existing convictions about gender or homosexuality or divorce or anything. No, we are to take our guidance from Jesus. What, then, teaches Jesus? We find out in this evening's Bible reading from Matthew 19:

<sup>4</sup>He answered, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, <sup>5</sup>and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? <sup>6</sup>So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." (Matthew 19:4-6, RSV)

Let me tell you how I read the Bible. Plenty of clergy disagree with me. But this is how I read the Bible as it has been understood in the great tradition of the church: God made us male and female. We did not make ourselves, but were made by God. In our being, in our sexual identities, we are as He wants us to be. If there is no God, then I suppose we can consider ourselves to be whatever sex we want. But if we believe in the God of the Bible, he gave us our sex, each one of us. He made us male and female. We are not free to overrule Him. Rather, we are to seek joy as the sex He has given us.

Second, marriage is between a man and a woman. Friendship between two men and friendship between two women is a precious thing on earth. Just how important is sex to such friendships? Is sex being introduced where it does not belong? In any case, Jesus teaches us that marriage is between a man and a woman. Lifelong, faithful relationships between men or between women are good, I should think, but when Jesus speaks of marriage, he means marriage between a man and a woman. I do not oppose secular marriage between two men or two women. It is a legal option. But I believe that marriage *in the church* should honor the teaching of Jesus.

And then there is divorce. Here, the teaching of Jesus seems a bit complicated to me.

Jesus had already spoken of divorce, back in the Sermon on the Mount, Chapter 5. It was one of his "But I say until you..." sayings:

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' <sup>32</sup>But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:31-32, RSV)

Perhaps the Pharisees think that Jesus has forgotten what he earlier said. Or maybe something worse: maybe they want to use his earlier teaching to snare him... to suggest that Jesus is in conflict with the teaching of Moses. But Jesus is not in conflict with the teaching of Moses. How could he be? If Moses spoke the truth at all, it was because he correctly heard Jesus speaking to him. So, Jesus knows about and confirms the traditional ground of divorce: unrepentant adultery. We should add a second traditional ground of divorce — a second justification for divorce that we believe is Spirit-led in the long tradition of the Church: I mean unrepentant physical abuse of a spouse. These traditional grounds for divorce do not mandate divorce, but they do mean that the wronged spouse can turn to divorce in good conscience.

But the Pharisees are lifting up another ground for divorce. It was a possibility disputed in the tradition of the rabbis. I mean the possibility of writing a certificate of divorce and being done with the marriage. The Pharisees say this to Jesus:

<sup>7</sup>“Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?” (Matthew 19:7, RSV)

Now, here is where things become complicated, in my opinion. On the one hand, Jesus does not deny that Moses said this. We read about this in Deuteronomy 24:

<sup>1</sup>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... (Deuteronomy 24:1, NRSV)

The passage goes on to talk about the duties of the first husband to such a divorced woman if a second husband should also divorce her or should die. Moses says that the first husband may not marry her a second time.

Well, you can understand why the rabbis would dispute with one another about this teaching of Moses. The whole thing is a procedure vulnerable to abuse.

Jesus, in our passage, does not deny the teaching of Moses, but he does put that teaching into divine context. He says that divorce is not what our Maker wants for us. Jesus speaks of “hardness of heart”:

<sup>8</sup>He said to them, “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. (Matthew 19:8, RSV)

Adding this all up, I think we should conclude that God knows about reasons for divorce and supports the good reasons. Still, it is not what our Maker wants for us, and if there is to be divorce, it means that something has gone wrong — there has been some “hardness of heart” at play. That is why people might want to consider private confession and absolution before marrying again.

These are all controversial matters and often heartbreaking. I want to press on a bit with controversial matters simply by pointing out the conjunction of the first part of our reading with the second part. In the first part, Jesus has been speaking about divorce. In the second part, he blesses the children. He lays his hands on the children and prays for them.

So I suggest that one important form of blessing the children is that mother and father do not divorce. Perhaps some people look down on the idea of “staying together for the sake of the children.” I do not look down on that idea. At least, mother and father can do this: They can stay together for the sake of their children and pretend, if need be, that they still love one another. And in the pretending, they might begin to love one another again. Please, God. Let it be so.

Because, if I am reading the sociological reports right, it is a benefit for children to grow up in a household where mother and father can be counted on to be there. Of course, death sometimes comes along and takes one of the spouses away. But short of that, the loyalty of mother and father to one another raises up a good possibility for the children — the possibility of being true to one another until death does us part. Behind the scenes, there might be disappointment between husband and wife, but perhaps they can maintain the outward marks of holy marriage, in hope that their children might have happier marriages themselves someday.

Finally, let me admit that I am always a bit sheepish in talking about marriage. I am reluctant because I know that people could come along and say, “Well sure, *you* like marriage. You are married to Carol!” There would be justice in such a remark. And yet, I also think that Jesus speaks of marriage in such a way that it could well be a joy in *any* couple’s life. In fact, it has been a joy in lots and lots of marriages through the ages.

Does Jesus have moral convictions? Does he have convictions about what is good and true and lovely in a human life? I think he does. And I think it is the part of his followers, to follow him in his manner of life. After all, he only wants good for us. And to him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.