

Mark 10:2-16    20th Sunday after Pentecost    October 7, 1991

*2Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" 3He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" 4They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." 5But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 6But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 7'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, 8and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."*

*10Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; 12and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."*

*13People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." 16And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.*

When I was young, we raised sheep. Around our yard was a fence that wound itself around sixty acres of grass, woods, creeks, shade trees, a paradise for the sheep and the lambs. So where did they seem to spend most of their time? Up against the fence, necks twisted to slide through the opening between the boards or the wire, always wanting to stretch beyond the limits. They must have been equipped with some supernatural radar, for leave a gate open and before you could turn around and they were wandering out on Huron Avery Road or Rt. 250. Even the lambs, especially the lambs would find every fault in the fence and wriggle their way through, then bawl and bawl because their mother was kept from them by the barrier they had just escaped.

It's no accident that the scriptures speak of us as sheep, the Lord as our shepherd.

Remember Eden - trees everywhere loaded with fruit, just one in the whole garden fenced off by God's command, yet that is where serpent and man and woman gathered.

So the Pharisees might have asked Jesus many questions about grazing in the paradise of marriage. They might have discussed love and faithfulness; they could have talked with him about listening, forgiving. But instead they rushed over to the fence, looking for a way of escape, an open gate.

"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" they asked Jesus.

"What did Moses command you?" was Jesus' question in return.

"Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her," they answered.

There was an open gate, a way out, Moses who had spoken for God in giving the law had left it open. But now Jesus slammed it shut, locked it tight.

"Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

God doesn't want an open gate; God wants God's children to graze in the pasture he has provided. God has given a good gift, a precious gift when he joins the hands of a man and women in marriage. Struggles and hardships and trials that might overwhelm them each individually, he will give them strength to conquer together. As they love and are loved in marriage, the two together become more than they have ever been. If God blesses them with children, their faithful marriage becomes a blessing to us all as children are raised in an atmosphere of love and peace.

Yet like the voice of the serpent, many are suggesting that a real paradise will be found by nibbling what is forbidden. Outside the fence are real pleasures movies and novels and songs all whisper. Let desire lead you where it will is the message a whole world speaks to us.

Jesus voice is a lonely voice: One man for one woman, one woman for one man. What God has joined together, let no one separate.

Yet it is not enough simply to remain in the pasture of marriage. For the blessing God intends for marriage is the most precious blessing, and the hardest to attain.

We all know couples that are just together, kind of like a couple of three year olds that are playing with toys in the same room, but having no interaction. We know couples that stay together, but talk little, listen even less, whose relationship is marred by wounds that have never healed but which are covered over just the same. Habit is about the only bond that holds them for love has been long since lost.

Such a relationship is a mockery of what God intends.

Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly." "Behold, I make all things new," is his promise to you.

Abundant life and newness come to us through the forgiveness that Christ gives. He forgives you all your sins, every day he gives you a fresh start. Even the deepest wounds of sin are healed through Jesus. Healed.

But the healing is not for you alone. You who are forgiven God gives the power to forgive. In Christ you husbands can forgive your wives, wipe the slate clean. Begin again. In Christ you wives can forgive your husbands, wipe the slate clean. Begin again. On your own you could never do it, but in Christ God will grant you the heart to forgive as you have been forgiven.

Now as Christ forgives us he does not intend us to simply return to old habits, old ways of sin but to be his new creation. So too in marriage forgiveness is only the beginning. Talking, listening, seeing one another with new eyes, wanting to know this person better than you have ever known anyone before, not to judge but to understand, this God intends to follow forgiveness.

“I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly.”

“What God has joined together, let no one separate.”

But sometimes within that pasture of marriage is a predator. The very person who vowed to love and cherish is intent on harming - or crawls through the fence, never to come back.

That happened with our sheep also. Sometimes for reasons we never understood, a ewe, a mother sheep, would reject her young. The lamb would come to suck, and instead of nourishment was met with the butt of a head, or the kick of a hoof - the one who was to love turned viscious.

Sometimes we would find another sheep that would care for that lamb - a sheep whose own lamb had died. Sometimes we would feed the rejected lambs by bottle until they were strong enough to find their own way.

I know that our Lord does not have less compassion than I did for my sheep. If you are divorced, if the paradise of marriage you one day entered has been lost, know that your shepherd still wants to lead you to green pastures, beside still waters. Divorce is not God's intention, but you remain his child, forgiven, ready to be made new.

In just a moment we are going to join in singing the hymn after the sermon. It is a prayer written for a man and a woman on their wedding day. This morning as we sing this

hymn, I want you to pray this prayer for someone. For a couple married many years, or just beginning in marriage, or for yourself in your own marriage. Sing the prayer for God's grace and God's blessing and love in a marriage.