

## What God Has Joined Together, Let No One Separate

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**Text: Mark 10:2-16**

A pastor was greeting worshipers at the door after the service when a highly critical church member approached and enthusiastically shook her hand saying, "Pastor, you gave a terrific sermon today!" Flushed with pride, but wanting to appear humble, the pastor said, "Oh it wasn't me. I have to give the credit to God." To which the church member replied, "Well, it wasn't *that* good!"

---Ah yes, the perpetual dance between human effort and God's grace, between our work and our faith, between the real and the ideal. Perhaps this dance is never more vivid than at the table of the Lord, where we eat a bite of bread and drink a swallow of Welch's grape juice and receive the real presence of Christ into our lives. The elders who get everything ready and set the table can tell you just how much effort it took to buy fresh bread, cut it up, pour the juice into the little cups, consult the manual about how to arrange it, not to mention the clean-up afterwards. I sometimes wonder if they flinch a little when the minister recites the words of institution inviting everyone to come to the Lord's Table and enjoy the feast *Christ* has prepared.

But the Lord's Table it is, and on this World Communion Sunday we particularly give thanks for God's work evidenced in this meal: the reconciling power to unite us with God and with one another throughout this fragile planet. Here we experience "communion" -a mystical, spiritual bond connecting us across all boundaries and all divisions. [The globe is/the cloths draping the communion table are] meant to visually express the universal scope of this communion. Today we are one with Christians the world over.

It's a pretty picture, but far from reality. Clashes between the church in the developed and developing worlds have escalated over theology and ecology and increasingly, over economy in the face of the growing gap between rich and poor. Our Episcopalian brothers and sisters find themselves at odds with worldwide Anglican bodies over the matter of ordination of gay and lesbian persons, and you know how that debate in the Presbyterian Church has fueled the departure of some congregations from our denomination. And we don't even need to go global to see the rifts that occur when two or three are gathered together. Behind and underneath the masks of our smiling Sunday faces are hurts and disappointments and tensions in our relationships with

one another. Sitting in a pew near you is someone harboring a grudge, someone dealing with a broken heart, someone contemplating leaving a relationship, someone with unresolved anger, someone who feels invisible or undervalued, someone whose fear wraps them in isolation. Humanly speaking, we are separated from one another; our communion put asunder.

Our gospel text this morning speaks a word about a particular kind of break in human relationships, that of divorce. But watch out! It's a text that has too often been cited as the last word on the Church's teaching about divorce and remarriage. Several interpretive details challenge that perspective. First, we see these words occasioned by the religious leaders' attempts once again to trip up Jesus and discredit him. Second, the passage concludes with Jesus overriding the objection of his disciples to the children being brought to him for blessing. Jesus not only welcomes them, but holds them up as members of God's Kingdom. Then let's recall the historical context of biblical times as well: a patriarchal society in which men ruled and women and children obeyed. In marriage the wife and any children they had were regarded as the property of husband and father; women had few legal rights, certainly not the ability to end her marriage. Nor did the culture provide a divorced woman any economic security—neither child support nor alimony, and precious little possibility of making a living. So let's hear this text considering these interpretive themes, that we might also discover God's Word of restoration and reconciliation not simply within marriage but in all human relationships. What God has joined together, let no one separate. A reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the tenth chapter at the second verse:

MARK 10:2-16

You have to look hard to see God's grace in these uncompromising words. As a divorced person, I can't help but hear them as judgment and condemnation. More recently, I've heard them used as the primary justification for banning same-sex marriage. And yet, the Church—the Protestant Church anyway—has tempered its understanding of Jesus' intent here. We do recognize divorce as a moral choice in some situations. We joyfully marry people who have been divorced, and see their new marriage as a sign of God's forgiveness and a fresh start. Our growing experience of committed gay and lesbian relationships has caused us to rethink the definition of marriage to include these couples as well.

At least part of the reason the Church has changed its mind on these matters lies in this text itself—or rather the context: Jesus didn't preach this to the multitudes; he directed them to the religious authorities trying to test him. He's not laying down a new law, but questioning an old one. He's not reinforcing traditional patriarchal forms of marriage and family, but

proclaiming a new order of relationships based on equality and acceptance. Women are given the same rights and responsibilities as men. Children—who in Jesus' time represented the least valued members of society—are brought into the center and blessed. This was a sea change then and now; challenging a stratified social order and creating in its place a community of equals, spiritually connected with unbreakable bonds.

The religious leaders focused on the legality of divorce, but Jesus flips their question into discussion about marriage and an affirmation of God's original intent that "the two shall become one flesh." You and I know that "one flesh" cannot be separated except through great wounding. God created human beings in love and for love, and not for broken hearts. God did not design the world for divorce in the same way God did not design the world for warfare. And yet God knew from the beginning that a creation crafted for freedom would indeed take up arms against each other, would hurt and disappoint and be unfaithful to one another.

And that is precisely why we have this table. God's love for humanity is so faithful, so persistent, that God does not resign us to the sorry consequences of our choices and behaviors. God sent Jesus into the world to heal the hurts and mend the breaks and thaw the ice in our relationships. God sent Jesus into the world to bring down the dividing walls that keep us apart, and to gather us at one table.

God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ restores community across the borders and barriers and boundaries erected by fear and selfish pride—by sin, in a word. The fact is all of us—married, remarried, divorced, single, gay or straight—fall short of God's glorious intent for us. We stand in need of God's grace to rebuild and strengthen our relationships. The celebration of the Lord's Supper reminds us that those relationships go far beyond the families we create through marriage.

Dorothy Day, social activist and one of the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement, lived her life among the poor and outcast in a section of New York City known as "Hell's Kitchen." Listen to her description of communion:

*We cannot love God unless we love each other.  
We know God in the breaking of bread, and  
we know each other in the breaking of bread,  
and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a  
banquet, and life is a banquet too—even with  
a crust—where there is companionship. We  
have all known loneliness, and we have  
learned that the only solution is love, and*

*love comes with community.*

Friends, how well we know loneliness! And how effectively has God breached that chasm through God's perfect love—the only sure unshakeable foundation upon which we build and rebuild our imperfect relationships. God has already joined us together, and promised that nothing can separate us from God's love. This is not just warm and fuzzy theology. The communion bread is broken; the communion cup is filled with crushed grapes. Jesus' death is evidence of how far we have fallen from God's intent for the beloved creation. But his suffering was redemptive; in his death are the seeds of resurrection—new life. We are not saved by human effort, but by God's grace, our human efforts can participate in divine salvation. We can seek forgiveness from another; we can take steps to restore a friendship lost in anger; we can nurture our most intimate relationships with time and attention; we can get out of our comfort zones to learn about "the other." The world joins us at this table; and paradoxically, we see that the world begins on our doorstep.

I've heard a story enough to believe its truth, though the details get changed. Sometimes it's told of a Jewish settler and a Palestinian; other times a Serb and a Croatian; a Hutu and a Tutsi; a black South African and a white Africaner. But it's always the same story: amid a context of violence and strife and shortages, the two are vying for the last loaf of bread in a bakery. The tension mounts, reflecting years of division and distrust, until the baker takes the single loaf, tears it in two and gives one-half to each. Is there a better definition of communion?

So much divides us; some of our differences feel irreconcilable; some of the hurts so deep and long-standing we doubt they can ever heal. We're hungry for wholeness. We're invited to this table because it's the one place where we taste hope that finally, what God has joined together, no one will separate. Here we receive what will make it possible. AMEN.