

## **Beautiful Blankets, Difficult Texts**

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The month of October is upon us; and this means Blanket Sunday, Farewell Sunday, the Youth Missions Craft Show, and the Festival of Reformation is beginning to unfold right before our eyes. It is a busy, action-packed month that begins today with our colorful display of hand-made quilts; joined by a good number of store-bought blankets, and I don't know how many health kits and school kits are also on display here in our Sanctuary. All I know is that the kids from Vacation Bible School, the Women of Zion, members and friends of Zion, and all the congregations represented at the Canton-Massillon Cluster Fall Gathering have made for quite a collection of health kits and school kits. Hands-on, heart-felt, lives engaged in the mission of *growing in love and service by grace*: that is what is represented with our gathering on Blanket Sunday, a celebration that lifts up the role of women in the church, while also heralding the good work of Lutheran World Relief around the world.

Every year these collections of quilts and kits send our love – and God's – to families in need everywhere. From Armenia to Zimbabwe, reaching deep into the jungles of the Congo and aiding earthquake victims along the shorelines of Indonesia: the list of places where Lutheran World Relief quilts and kits are present to bring help and comfort to persons in need is truly incredible. For your information, Blanket Sunday extends well beyond the boundaries of Lutheranism in terms of those who give the blankets and those who receive them. If ever there were a celebration that lived the meaning of our great ecumenical hymn, which we have chosen as our Hymn of the Day, namely, *In Christ There Is No East or West* – “in him no south or north, but one great fellowship of love through the whole wide earth” – then Blanket Sunday is the activity and the Sunday in the Church year that does just that. I could talk about the virtues of this ministry all morning long, especially if it helped me to avoid addressing the controversies that are assigned with today's Old Testament and Gospel Lessons.

Marriage and divorce are not the kind of topics a Pastor wants to address from the pulpit; but that is exactly what Genesis 2:18-24 and Mark 10:2-16 seem to be placing on the menu for the day. It is not the Scriptures that are problematical; rather, it is the culture in which divorce and remarriage touch virtually everyone's life. These are deeply sensitive matters. It is a naive and foolish preacher who thinks that making pronouncements from the pulpit regarding marriage and divorce will not come without a cost. I'd like to begin addressing this topic by offering an observation that I find clear and impressive, namely, that the model of life-long monogamous marriage is not something that springs from the law of our nature; it is a vision that springs from the love that is rooted in the faithfulness of the God we encounter in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The logic of this model for marriage, which seeks to be faithful with all that we are for as long as we live, is found in

the pages of Scripture, where the God we worship proves faithful to His Word forever. While this model for marriage seems to be popular around the world, you will only understand it if you understand the God who has made us His people.

I find these kinds of observations interesting and impressive. But what is also interesting is that in just a matter of years and decades following the resurrection of our Lord, the Christian community found itself struggling to adapt to the realities of this world. That is what we find when we compare the clarity of Mark with subsequent accounts in Matthew and Luke. In all of the Gospels Jesus is clear that changes in Judaism to accommodate our inability to live the love and faithfulness we aspire to was rooted in the sin that stains our lives. “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses wrote this commandment [about certificates of divorce].” (Mark 10:5) Then Jesus invites us to take a closer look at the Book of Genesis. “From the beginning He 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. They are no longer two but one. What, therefore, God has joined together, let no one seek to separate.” (Mark 10:6-9)

Jews had been living with the possibility of divorce and remarriage for a thousand years. So Jesus’ disciples were somewhat shocked when he challenged this accepted practice. In the house they asked him again about this matter; and Jesus makes his position very clear: “Whoever divorces and marries another commits adultery, man or woman, the husband and the wife.” (Mark 10:12) However, Matthew remembered Jesus’ words on this matter a little bit differently. There Jesus is less universal and not quite as unyielding. “I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, *unless some form of infidelity is involved*, and marries another, commits adultery.” (Matthew 19:9) My point here is not to get all technical on us, but simply to observe that in a matter of years, not centuries, the Christian community found itself needing to adapt the reality of sins’ stain in and on our lives. God’s intention is clear: life-long faithfulness best captures our experience of God’s love. But life among sinners complicates the ease with which God’s love forms the reality of the lives we live.

Luke, too, realized that the reign of God had drawn near in the ministry of Jesus. However, rather than focusing on the chasm, the unbridgeable gulf, that sin creates between God’s love and our lives, he opened wide the gates of the kingdom to all who would enter, to all who would receive the Good News of God’s peace, opening their hearts and their lives to a God who saves us, not with His law but through His love. God will see to it that all resolves well in the reign of His kingdom, and many questions about this transition remain; but, for our purpose this morning, especially as Lutherans, who are among the strongest advocates of leading with God’s grace, it is important that we not allow the judgment cast over us by God’s law to get in the way of the mercy that flows from the power of God’s love. Sure, the will of God expressed in the Law is an important guide for righteousness; but God has made it clear through the ministry of Jesus, in the witness of the Scriptures, and through the life of the church that we are saved by grace

through faith in Christ and not by works of the Law. That is the Good News of the Gospel, which we proclaim with the forgiveness of sins announced every Sunday; and it is that same Gospel that governs how God looks at us all the other days of the week, too.

My point this morning is to understand how the early church, just years separated from the earthly ministry of Jesus, found itself in the midst of the need to meet the challenges of a changing reality. The Christian community responded by affirming the priority of God's grace over focusing on our works as the key to trusting God's love and living it. Our opening hymn this morning expresses perfectly the challenge the church faced then and the challenge we face today: "The Church of Christ in every age, beset by change but Spirit led, must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead." [*Lutheran Book of Worship*, #433] Our Lutheran heritage invites us to trust God's grace over our works, and to trust the power of God's love over our preoccupation with religion's laws.

That is exactly what Jesus did time and time again; and that's what we see Jesus doing on the bulletin cover. Today Jesus is reaching out to children, not because children were the center of cultural focus and attention back then. He is reaching out to children precisely because they were not the center of personal attention and cultural protections. With this act, he is reaching out to include those who were traditionally relegated to the periphery of social concern and personal importance. He is opening wide the embrace of God's grace. How does this relate to marriage and divorce? Jesus would not be trapped by the religious conventions of his day; and we should not allow ourselves to be trapped by the conventions of tradition either. It is not just the freedom of the Gospel that is at stake, but the priority of God's grace. Jesus will not be constrained by the limits of the law. His vision for the kingdom trusts love over law. He challenges his followers to get the focus off quibbling over our standards so that we can see a new standard, the standard of God's grace, which is defined by unparalleled mercy and measured by unlimited love.

Jesus is not against the law, or traditions that honor God's call to do the right thing and live the right way. But our preoccupation with the traditions we've created cannot be allowed to blind us to the new wine of God's love that bursts the old wineskins of our traditions. As we emphasized last week, when it comes to the problem of sin and the challenge of righteous living, it is important that we're not so focused on the foot that's stumbling that we fail to stand with the lost, the lonely, with those who need our voice, and those who need God's love. Jesus' vision for the kingdom never loses sight of inclusion as the key to becoming the community God wants us to be. In drawing our attention to children and inviting his disciples to welcome them, Jesus is asking us to be the kind of community that welcomes outsiders of every sort, even those who are found outside the life that God's Law and our traditions prescribe. For these were precisely the people that Jesus wanted to include among those who have been called by God's word, embraced by God's grace, and claimed by God's love. Even this text, which talks about issues like divorce and remarriage, returns to the theme of inclusion to direct our focus to what it is that we need to do and be in our desire to live faithfully ... in Jesus' name. Amen