

And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Mom, what do you want for your birthday? I remember well that whenever we asked our mother that question, she always gave the same basic answer: I want my children to be healthy and happy. If you asked her what she wanted for Christmas, she always wanted peace on earth. That was my mom: she wanted happiness and blessings for other people. She wanted everyone to see and appreciate the goodness of God in their lives.

I started thinking about that a great deal as I was reading our Scripture lessons for this week, especially since the lessons have such a strong family theme. I thought of those things that mom wanted for her family. She wanted us to be happy and healthy. She wanted us to grow up *in the discipline and instruction of the Lord*. (Ephesians 6:4 - ESV) She wanted us to know Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. She wanted us to live under the grace and guidance of God.

What if we were to ask our heavenly Father, "Father, what do you want for your family?" When we look at God's Word today, we hear God's answer. "I want My children to be happy, healthy and heavenly. I want them to know My great love for them, and the forgiveness and life I shower upon them for the sake of My Son, who died and rose for them. I want them to know that I eagerly answer the prayer of that same Son who asked: *Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.* (John 17:24 - ESV)"

The apostle John tells us: "*See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.*" (1 John 3:1, ESV) We are God's children! While we have wandered from Him, He brings us back and marks us as His own in the waters of Holy Baptism. We are His children, and He brings us together—as family, and in families—that He may show His love and care for each and everyone of us, the love that we see so clearly through Jesus Christ, the One who brings us into God's happy, healthy and heavenly family of grace and life.

Let me say right up front that because of the brokenness and imperfection of our world, there are some things in our text today that can be hard to hear. It is hard to miss the family theme in our lessons today. If all families were perfect; if there were no broken relationships or divorces; no unwanted singleness; no infertility; no lost children; no widows or widowers then the words of our Creator and Lord would resonate joyfully in our ears. Sadly that is not the case, and for those who are hurting, hearing how God wants us to be happy, healthy and heavenly may seem to amplify our pain. Yet God does speak of the blessings of family as He designed it. The psalm appointed for this day reminds us: *Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.* (Psalm 128:3-4 - ESV) Our Old Testament lesson (Gen. 2:18-25) tells of the creation of woman and the institution of marriage. Those words of Genesis reminded us that God wanted the happiness of the man He created out of the dust of the ground, and recognized right away that *"It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."* (Genesis 2:18 - ESV) In our text Jesus is speaking to the question of divorce, and we hear from the Saviour the restatement of God's desire for His people in marriage. Jesus also speaks of the blessings of children and reminds us: *"Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God."*

Even our Epistle lesson (Heb. 2:1-18) speaks of the One who came down from heaven to bring us into God's family, as He shares our humanity. What a great miracle of grace this is, that the Almighty becomes a Child and grows up in an earthly home. He came to take His place beside us so ***that through [His] death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*** (Hebrews 2:14-15 - ESV) Christ comes into the family of man so that He, by His death and resurrection, might bring us into the family of God.

Our text is the beginning of Jesus' last journey through Judea, on His way to Jerusalem. Jesus has already told His disciples, and will soon tell them again: ***"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."*** (Mark 10:33-34 - ESV) As they travel some Pharisees came up with a question they hope will discredit Him: ***"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"*** Without going through the long-standing debate about this, Jesus simply reminds them that divorce is one of the sad consequences of sin in this fallen world. He tells them that God joins a man and a woman into the oneness that is to glue them together, so that He may guide and bless their lives and that they might live in Him. Then he teaches us that God not only loves husbands and wives, but that he loves the products of these marriages, their children. Jesus shows this so vividly when he rebukes His disciples when they are trying to "shoo" the children away from Him. Jesus declares: ***"Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."*** And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

Oh, how wonderful the love that God has for us! He loves us all, from the lowliest child to the greatest of kings and noblemen. God wants us to be happy, healthy, and heavenly. That is one reason God establishes our families. Remember how God said: ***"It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."*** (Genesis 2:18 - ESV) Studies have often shown that married men are happier and healthier than their single counterparts. That is also true of married women. Marriage brings that oneness, that closeness that comes from having the one who compliments us; the one who is our lover, our friend, our confidant, our helpmeet. From the very beginning, Jesus says, God wanted this oneness to be the source of blessing and joy for men and women.

Unfortunately, it doesn't always work that way. After all, we still sin at work all around us in this world. We know that we ***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*** (Romans 3:23 - ESV) We see the sad consequences of sin in broken homes, where husband and wife cannot get along. We see spouses who are unfaithful and break that marriage vow. We see children who are neglected and abused. We see men and women heartbroken because they are not blessed with children. We also see children who abandon their aging parents; children who do not heed the Lord's commandment: ***"Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you."*** (Exodus 20:12 - ESV)

And let's be honest with ourselves: have we not, on more than a few occasions, hurt those who should be the closest to us? Our sinful actions have brought the disappointment and sorrow that robs our homes of their joy; that brings tension to our relationships; that embitters the lives of parents and children alike. The God who wants us to be happy, healthy and heavenly sees how hurtful, distressed and even demonic we can be in our world.

Thankfully, the Saviour comes with the healing prescription. He brings us the forgiveness that He has won for us at the cross. What a miracle this is! As the psalmist said, and as our epistle lesson reminds us: ***"What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him?"*** (Hebrews 2:6, ESV) Our Lord does care. He is mindful of us and our needs. Jesus blessed the children, putting His arms around them. Those same arms would be stretched out on a cross, as the Saviour suffers for all the brokenness and sinfulness of our world. The Lord of All, who created man and woman and united them with one another in marriage now unites Himself with all people, taking the church and its people as His bride. He is faithful to us, forgiving, helping, blessing us in spite of our sin and sustaining us in the midst of all the hurts and pains of this world.

God's forgiveness—and the forgiving attitude of God's children toward each other—brings happiness to our homes. It makes our families healthy. And it brings us into the heavenly. When God is in the home, there is a joyful home. What we just sang a few moments ago is so true: ***"Oh, blest the house, whate'er befall, Where Jesus Christ is all in all! A home that is not wholly His—How sad and poor and dark it is!"*** (LSB 862) When we build our homes firmly on the Saviour's love for us—that love that flows from the cross and from His empty tomb—then we have those blessings God wants us to have. We are happy, healthy and heavenly, in our homes and in His family of grace. Amen.