

The Faith of a Child

In the name of him who created man and woman in his own image, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's Gospel reading, we hear how Jesus takes on the sticky issue of divorce and remarriage. The answer he gives would have been quite a surprise to the Pharisees who asked him the question – maybe almost as much of a surprise as it is to a lot of people living in our day and age who consider the bond formed in marriage to be anything but sacred. Today many people treat marriage as if it were about as disposable as a Styrofoam coffee cup. In any case, the big question in Jesus' day (like it often is today) was not, "Is it okay to divorce your spouse?" That was taken for granted. If the Law of God given through Moses allowed it, they reasoned, it must be okay. The only question they had was "What constituted proper grounds for a divorce?" Some said basically anything. If your wife burns the lamb chops some evening, if you just get tired of her, or if you find someone younger and prettier, well, then by all means, send her packing. Just make sure you write a certificate of divorce. If you do the paperwork like Moses commanded, then everything's just fine and dandy. That was one view. There were others whose understanding of the matter was a bit more stringent. They said that there were certain conditions that had to be met first; but if they could be established, then again, by all means, divorce was fine and a man could pursue the dissolution of his marriage confident that God was pleased by the whole thing.

Now, by asking Jesus about it, these Pharisees were hoping that he would pick one side of the argument or the other. They had been arguing about these issues forever, and they knew that the opinions of revered Rabbis from the past could be mustered on both sides in defense of their views. So either way he went, they felt that the other side could shoot his choice full of holes. They figured they had him. When he answered the question, they'd be able to make Jesus look like a fool – and that's what they were really after.

But as usual, Jesus turned the tables on them and showed how neither side really grasped the mind of God in the matter. "You misunderstand the difference between God's will concerning marriage and a concession he made on account of people's sin." Divorce never pleases God. He hates it. His intent for marriage is that people hold it sacred and live in it according to his design. He wants them to cherish their spouses and keep the promises they make to love, honor, and care for one another. *That's* the Lord's will for every marriage. The problem is that in this fallen world people do not always live according to God's will. It often happens that they break their promises and do not keep their commitments. They fail to love and cherish their spouses like they said they would, and instead they act in ways that are resentful, angry, selfish, and unforgiving. Sometimes they are unfaithful with their bodies, and do not keep their vows to give themselves sexually only to their spouses. And such behaviors undermine the foundation of trust and destroy the climate of mutual respect that are necessary for a marriage to endure. Recognizing that this would sometimes be the case, the Lord made allowances in the law he gave his people to deal with it. But the point Jesus is making is that it's never a good thing. If a marriage ends in a divorce it is always because there's at least one person and in most cases two people who are breaking the most sacred promise that can be made to another person before God. And from the Lord's point of view, that's very serious indeed. What makes it even worse is the damage it does beyond the couple who are breaking up. Divorce hurts children and other family members. It opens wounds that continue bleed for a long time, or that become infected and spread poison to places unforeseen when the divorce takes place. And since the family unit built on the marriage bond is the basic building block of

society, the entire community grows weaker and more disordered with every divorce that takes place. No one should ever seek a divorce. If one becomes necessary, it's to be seen by all as the tragedy it is.

But again, the Lord knew that sometimes it would be necessary – in the same way that wars sometimes are necessary to protect nations from aggression, or that jails are necessary to keep criminals from hurting people. Divorce falls into the general category of necessary evils for dealing with evil – and specifically the sin that Jesus calls “hardheartedness”. When a person is practicing this sin, it's as if their heart is covered by a hard shell that resists the penetration of God's Word. It's like the hard soil in the Parable of the Sower. The seed of God's Word can't get through the surface and take root, so the soil remains lifeless and unproductive. That's the way it is with hardheartedness. It's, “I hear what you're saying, Lord; but I refuse to believe it. I'm not going to let that Word of yours in and let it grow in me and change me.”

This is what happens when Christian people divorce. And please don't misunderstand me. I know that there are cases in which there's physical abuse or abandonment or gross infidelity. It's precisely for such cases that the Lord permitted divorce, even though it's still a tragedy when it happens. Unfortunately, these days most divorces happen simply because, “We argue all the time”, “We just can't seem to get along”, “We aren't in love anymore”, and other such non-biblical reasons for divorce. It's at such times that pastors are likely to hear, “I just can't see how even God can help save this marriage” as if there were a problem too big for him to handle. Somehow, I just can't see the Lord saying, “You're right. This is so broke that even I can't fix it. There are sins here too big for me to forgive, and hurts too deep for me to heal. The misery has gone on for too long now. I'm powerless. Go ahead and get your divorce. It's the only way.” No, I can't envision him saying that. Of course, what a person who says God can't save a marriage really means is, “I've made up *my* mind and I'm not going to let the Lord do his work.” That's the stubborn, willful, hardhearted refusal to believe that the Lord can and will bring his peace and healing to the situation. It's amazing isn't it? “God can save my wretched soul from hell by sending his Son to die for my sins. He can give me new life through his Spirit. He can fill me with his love. He will raise my dead, decayed body on the Last Day, perfect and immortal, and give me eternal life. But don't ask me to believe that he can help me love my spouse, or help my spouse love me. That's not possible.”

And look: it isn't just divorces that are caused by hardheartedness. Pretty much all the conflicts we have with other people – especially with other Christian people – are the result of it as well. Our long standing grudges and feuds with family members, neighbors, and other members of the church, the people we are supposed to be loving and getting along with, well, “Do you really expect me to believe that the Lord can make it right between us?” You see, we often think we know better than God when it comes to such things – usually because we'd rather maintain the conflict and brood over our hurts than be reconciled to each other through the blood of Jesus. That's hardheartedness.

It's the cause of the conflicts and tragedies we've been talking about. But these are tragedies that can be avoided; and even when these tragedies have happened in the past, the wounds they've left behind can be healed. The problem is our hardness of heart; but in his Holy Word God has said, “I will remove your hard hearts of stone and I will give you hearts of living flesh.” And a little bit later in today's Gospel, Jesus tells us what kind of heart that is. It's the soft and supple heart of a child that is capable of holding a child's faith. He holds up little children as examples for all of us, and tells us that unless we receive him and believe in him like little children, we have no part of his Kingdom. And let's be clear about this: the heart of a child

is just as sinful as yours. At the same time, there are certain characteristics of a child's faith that make it something we should all seek for ourselves.

The first is credulity, which is the willingness and capacity to accept that what someone says is true. That's the way little children are. They possess the expectation that if mom or dad or some other adult in authority says something, then it's right. They believe what they're told without doubting. We lose this as we get older because we're so often disappointed. People tell us things that turn out not to be true, so we learn to be less gullible. The trouble is that we take this jaundiced view of what we hear and we apply it to what God says. But that makes no sense because God is inherently truthful. He cannot lie. Quick survey here: raise your hand if God has ever lied to you. You see? It doesn't happen. And yet when we doubt his Word and assume that he cannot heal our conflicts with others, we are effectively calling him a liar. And that's more than rank unbelief; that's blasphemy: an assault on the Lord's perfect character.

A second characteristic of a child's faith is its complete trust in the person who cares for it. Even an infant in its mother's arms knows whom to trust. The child knows when I need something, Mom will get it or do it for me. In fact, the infant is relying on Mom for needs it doesn't even know it has: clean clothing, bedding, medicine, shelter, transportation – the child understands none of these things; but it knows who its mother is and it knows that's the person who takes care of me so I don't need to worry about anything. That's how our childlike faith toward God is to be. We are to trust him for everything – even the needs we don't know we have. Chiefly, of course, we are to trust him for our salvation, for there is nothing we can do for ourselves in this regard. When it comes to forgiveness, life, and salvation we really are like little babes, one hundred percent dependent upon the Lord. If we begin to imagine otherwise, that there is something we must do for ourselves, it will only lead us to doubt and despair. The Lord wants our faith to be in him alone, for only then is the hope of our salvation sure.

And something else: as children get older, they come to learn that parents can fix anything. One Christmas I was celebrating with family that had three young boys. They were all opening presents and doing general Christmassy stuff. It was a bit of organized chaos in the house. Anyway, one of the boys was two or three years old. The little guy opened a gift, found a toy, and almost immediately broke off a piece of it. He sat there and cried for a few minutes, pretty much ignored by everyone because there was so much mayhem going on. But then this look of sudden inspiration came upon him. He went to the kitchen, opened a drawer, and pulled out a roll of Scotch tape. Then he went to the living room and set the broken toy and the tape in his father's lap. The father, who was engaged in a conversation and hadn't noticed any of this, looked down at his son with this, "What's this all about?" look on his face. But the kid just stared up at his father smiling. "Dad will fix it. I know he can." That same childlike faith is how we are to approach our Father in heaven. We bring him what's broken with the expectation that he can and will fix it. Though, it needs to be said that sometimes the fixing is painful. When the child comes to the parent with an infected finger caused by a splinter, there're going to be some tears shed before it's all over. So it is with us. When we come to God with our souls infected with sin, it's going to hurt to get it out – but we still come to him, knowing that he knows best and that in the end he'll make it all better.

A third aspect of a child's faith is its inquisitiveness. Sooner or later every kid goes through the "why?" phase. Some never grow out of it. But you know what I talking about: it's that seemingly endless series of questions that eventually leads every parent to finally answer in frustration, "Why? It's just the way it is, that's why! Stop asking so many questions!" But you see what a child going through this stage is doing: he's saying, "I don't know much; but I know that you do. And I believe what you're saying, so tell me more." This needs to be stressed. A

childlike faith does not mean an ignorant faith. It's not blind in the sense that it doesn't seek to learn and know more. Truth is, I've heard young children give very insightful and sophisticated expressions to their faith. I'm sure some of you have too. And part of it also, as anyone who's been peppered with why's knows, is that sometimes it has less to do with the child's wanting to know answers than it does with the desire simply to keep the conversation going. The child is happy just listening to the parent respond to the questions – it's a way to share time and deepen the bond, even when the child is asking questions far beyond their ability to understand the answers to. So it is with our childlike faith towards God. Asking the questions and seeking the answers in his Word is a way to spend time with him. And unlike human parents, he never gets tired of answering all those questions. He is delighted to spend the time with you – especially since it's through hearing him speak that he gives you the faith of a child and changes you to be more like him.

And that leads to the fourth and final aspect of a child's faith that I'd like to mention today. It's imitation. Children naturally and unabashedly try to imitate the people they look up to. This is why you find little boys trying on their father's hat and work boots in front of a mirror, and little girls doing the same thing with their mother's makeup and purse. They want to be like their parents. They want to act like them. Of course, sometimes we are horrified with the behaviors and language that our children learn from us because they tend to pick it all up without discretion. We aren't always the best role models; but Christ our Lord is. We cannot go wrong seeking to imitate him. And with the faith of a child, that's exactly what we will want to do.

And that's all the more reason for us to seek to have a child's pure and holy faith. How do we get it? Well, I've already indicated that it comes of listening to the Lord speak. As Paul says in Romans, "Faith comes by hearing the Word of God." But I think the people in this morning's Gospel reading had the right idea. They were carrying their little children to Jesus so that he would touch them. They had heard how Jesus healed lepers and the lame, and how he gave sight to the blind and made the deaf to hear, and how he even raised the dead – always with a touch. They realized that there was a powerful blessing in the touch of Jesus, a blessing that they wanted to rest on their children. The hardhearted disciples tried to stop them. Jesus, they thought, didn't have time for such nonsense. The Lord had to set them straight. He told them that's exactly why he'd come: to bless little children with his touch, to take away our hard hearts of stone and the sins that are sealed up inside them, and to give us soft hearts of flesh that with a child's faith cling to him and his promises. It's the touch of Jesus that does it: in water, in his Word, in the consecrated bread and wine – through these Jesus takes us into his arms and blesses us; and by them he makes and keeps us the faithful children of God. May he continue to do so now and always. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!