

The Second Sunday in Angels' Tide, October 3, 2021

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United in Christ

Mark 10:2–16

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

In response to a question of the Pharisees, Jesus said: **“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate”** (v 9).

We live in a deeply divided time. I'm sure that isn't a surprise to anyone. The divisions between people are stark. There are red states and blue states. There are vaccinated and unvaccinated. There are Sox fans and Yankee fans—but at least there are two wild card teams in each league this year! We also see people divided into groups based on certain characteristics—skin color, social class, sex, age, and so on. Now it's one thing to recognize how people are different. There's nothing inherently wrong with that. For example, men and women are not the same. Genesis teaches that. So does biology. Not the same, yet both are created in the image of God and necessary for new life. But it's another thing to divide people for the purpose of setting them against each other—to see everything as a battle of *us versus them* and *them versus us*. Differences get turned into divisions, wedges are driven deeper, and people are played off against one another. The new language in our day of oppressor and oppressed does this. Beware of it. On the one hand, Satan hates differences and works to get rid of them, but, on the other hand, he loves division and seeks to increase it. He knows that divided we fall.

Today's Gospel reading speaks to division, to the all-too-common experience of love having been driven out and hatred and indifference having moved in. We experience this most painfully with those closest to us.

The issue of division is already there when the Pharisees come up **in order to test Jesus** (v 2). They've come up not to learn but to skirmish. They're itching for a fight. In fact, they've been itching for a fight ever since Jesus forgave the sins of a paralyzed man (Mk 2). “Why, only God can forgive sins!” they say. And they're right. But instead of rejoicing that God has come in the flesh to forgive sins, heal the sick, and bring His kingdom, they set themselves against Him. They separated themselves from their own Messiah. They made plans to destroy Him (Mk 3) and trap Him (Mk 8). And they continued to oppose Him and test Him (Mk 12) right up to His crucifixion.

Being divided against Jesus, this time the Pharisees set their trap by asking about a particular kind of division: divorce. They said to Him, **“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”** (v 2). They wanted Him to take a stand on whether or not divorce was permissible. Now it’s not entirely clear how they hoped to trap Jesus with this, and it really doesn’t matter. What matters is Jesus’ response. He doesn’t take the bait. He won’t delve into the ins and outs of what makes divorce is permissible and or get into a debate about the who, when, where, why, and how of what Moses allowed. He says this, **“Because of your hardness of heart [Moses] 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”** (vv 5–8). In other words, it was never supposed to be that way. God didn’t put “divorce” in the dictionary. From the beginning, He had established marriage as a permanent union of man, woman, and any children born from their union. Jesus’ last words are unambiguous: **“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate”** (v 9).

What has God joined together? In marriage, God joins two people—a man and a woman—into one. Marriage is good, but it’s not easy. Anyone who’s been married long knows that. There’s a reason the wedding vows mention sickness *and* health, richer *and* poorer, better *and* worse. When it gets rough, the temptation is to bail. Too often even Christians are willing to put asunder what God has joined. So be faithful to your vows. What does faithfulness require? It requires forgiveness, sacrifice, and a willingness to show love, especially when it isn’t deserved. This is why we pray for God to strengthen husbands and wives in faithfulness and love toward each other and to sustain and defend them in every trial and temptation. Sin creates and widens divisions, but our Lord forgives sin and heals divisions.

What else has God joined together? Families. God makes fruitful and multiplies. As He wills, He blesses the union of man and woman with children. Without our consent or permission, God brought us into existence through parents. We just got dropped in. We can choose our friends, but we don’t get to choose our parents, our siblings, or our children. Yet our greatest sources of heartache often come from trouble with members of our immediate family. When harsh words are said or unkind actions are done, we’re tempted to walk away, turn the cold shoulder, or give the silent treatment. It’s true that some family members are hard to love, forgive, or enjoy. But God has joined us to them, so do not allow yourself, your words or deeds, or your responses to be the source of division from the family God gives you. Live at peace with one another, for you have peace with God.

And what else has God joined together? Believers in Christ, including this congregation. In First Corinthians, St. Paul describes the church as one body. He writes: **“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit”** (1 Cor 12:12–13). As members of the body of Christ, God has made us members of one another. He has brought us together at this time and place. We are to guard this unity with our words and our deeds and to build one another up, rather than tear one another down. What might we do to contribute to greater harmony? How might we prevent divisions from forming or small cracks from becoming large chasms? Are we nursing hurts or harboring grudges? Have we spoken poorly of a brother- or sister-in-Christ? Let us strive to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

It’s true that in marriage, in the family, and in the church we live as sinners together with other sinners. There’s no avoiding sin, though there’s no reason to seek it out either. Like the Pharisees, we’re experts at seeing the sin that divides, especially the sin of others, but we have a harder time seeing the Savior who forgives and unites. But the Savior is here, too, here to forgive and heal the divisions we’ve created and sustained. Our Lord is not at odds with sinners but with sin. The only division that He creates and seeks is the division between the sinner and his or her sin. How does He do this? He does it with a special tool, with a sin divider, with an instrument that divides us from sin and death but joins us to Him: the cross.

His cross was placed upon you at your baptism. It was traced on your forehead and on your heart. It was driven into your soul. Like a flag planted in the earth, Jesus said, “I claim this one as Mine.” Through baptism, God has untied you to Jesus in His death and resurrection. He has buried you, your divisive tendencies, and your sin in the grave. He has raised you to a new and resurrected life—a life united to His life. And He has promised to remain faithful to you no matter what trial or tribulation may come your way. As St. Paul so confidently states in Romans chapter 8, **“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Rom 8:38–39).

Jesus doesn’t heal divisions with cheap grace but with real grace. Sin divides. Unity is secured at the cost of His blood. So we are united by His blood—by His blood shed for your sin and mine and for your spouse’s sin and for your family member’s sin and for the sin of your sister- or brother-in-Christ.

Nothing can separate you from His love. Even your sin has been overcome by His cross. This is what gives us the strength to stand against divisions and work for true unity, even amid our differences. It's what enables us to reach out across the divide of strained relationships to siblings, parents, and children. It what enables us to remain faithful to our vows and to seek help when needed.

The promise that we cannot be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus is everything for us, for our homes, our families, and our congregation. His faithfulness is our security, our confidence, and our forgiveness—even for our part in past divisions.

Oh, blest the house—the marriage, family, and congregation—whate'er befall,
Where Jesus Christ is all in all!

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
