

**Sunday, October 3, 2021 – Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**“Limitless Love”**

Mark 10: 2-16

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Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Our Gospel text is a little curious this week. We have a text with some religious leaders asking Jesus to pick sides in a debate over where the line is that a man is allowed to divorce his wife. I'll allude to that portion of the text but I want you to hear right off the bat, that's not the main focus of today's message – the last time I preached on this text a turn or two before in our three year cycle of readings I focused heavily on the marriage and divorce conversation, and I'll be happy to share that sermon with you if you're interested in hearing that, just shoot me an email and I'll send it to you.

But that divorce question text is followed up by a seemingly disconnected scene about little children coming to Jesus. You may have found yourself scratching your head on why the text is broken up this way for today's readings. What's the connection? We'll get to that.

If you've attended Mountain View or other Lutheran churches for any length of time, the last few verses of our Gospel lesson will be very familiar to you. These verses are read whenever we have a baptism of a child or infant. And that's where we'll be focusing today.

We start there because anyone who takes a moment to look beyond a Lutheran lens will quickly see that there's no baptism happening in this passage. Jesus isn't baptizing little children. Jesus doesn't mention baptism. Why in the world are we reading this at baptisms? Are we trying to say this text is about baptism? Are we trying to shoehorn a troublesome teaching into Scripture? I submit to you that answering the first question – what in the world this scene has to do with the marriage and divorce thing Jesus was talking about will lead us to the answer to the second question – how do we apply Jesus' welcoming invitation for little children to come to Him?

A crash course background on a simmering debate in the 1<sup>st</sup> century religious community – there were two rabbinical schools that were prominent in Jesus’ day debating with each other about marriage, among other issues – specifically, where’s the line where a man is allowed to divorce his wife? One school was strict (only for very literal, Scriptural reasons) and one was loose – pretty much for whatever reason you want. Jesus’ big problem with them is that their question on where the line is a question of loopholes. There are limits, right, to how much we have to love, hold our commitments, so on and so forth? Jesus won’t give loopholes for love. No – divorce is always a sad concession to life in a fallen world, but it isn’t God’s plan. Yes, from other places in Scripture we know there is forgiveness, there is redemption, there are sad cases where divorce is allowed... but looking for loopholes is the wrong approach. Jesus closes the loophole. At least, from the perspective of the questioner.

But from the other side of things, Jesus removes the limits. He quotes from our Old Testament text, about how a man will leave His father and mother, hold fast to his wife, they become one flesh, what God has joined together let not man separate. Joined together by God, the *design* and *intent* is limitless love, like the picture Paul paints in Ephesians 5 about how Christ gives His life for the church and sees through His commitment to the point of death. There’s security, permanence, commitment, vulnerability and a sacrificial kind of love in which trust and hope can thrive.

And right after Jesus makes this beautiful point about God’s limitless love, admonishing those who would seek to restrict His love by drawing lines and creating loopholes the disciples start limiting access to Jesus.

And this time it’s little children. In some ways our culture is opposite the culture of this time regarding children. We have our own cultural narratives about childhood – the wonder of childhood. The innocence of childhood. Letting out your “inner child” is a kind of call to get rid of all the bad things you’ve picked up along the way in life and be more raw, open, honest like a kid. We celebrate our children. We’ll run all over town for their extracurricular, give up weekends and holidays for their games

and tournaments. Don't get me wrong, people in ancient Palestine loved their children but children were not a symbol for positivity. Child was a byword for being irrational, being foolish, being self-centered, or being simple (in the mean sense of the word – you don't know much about anything). Social status and standing is heavily connected to age and wisdom and, well, kids don't have much of that. The sense is children don't need what Jesus has to offer.

And Jesus became really irritated. These are people for whom Jesus came! He came to bless them. And they are instructive for the rest of us, too – whoever does not *receive* the kingdom of God like a little child will not enter it.

The disciples have it backward. So did the Pharisees asking about divorce. They're focused on what someone can do and not do, where the line is, where the loopholes are. Jesus is focused on loving people in need. People like wives, set to be abandoned by their husbands. People like babies and kids, with nothing to offer and full of needs. We don't impress God with our stature or prominence. We don't satisfy God by walking on the right side of the line. We receive His blessing, like a little child.

Jesus receiving children for blessing in Mark 10 is not *about* baptism – but wow, is baptism about Jesus receiving and blessing these children! When you see the meaning of the actions of Jesus so many things come to light. We use other Scripture to help us interpret Scripture – Romans 3 tells us that all have sinned – all – including children, and fall short of the glory of God. In Acts 16 Paul baptizes the jailer at Philippi and his whole household – in keeping with the sermon Peter preached in Acts 2 – the promise of baptism is for you and your children.

Baptism is not about a decision that you are making for God. Baptism is with Paul in Galatians refers to as adoption. An adopted child receives the care of a parent, receives a new family name. Baptism is a mark, a sign that God sees on you – the New Testament version of an Old Testament practice of circumcision of baby boys. And what would happen to those boys? On the 8<sup>th</sup> day of their lives these newborns were circumcised to mark them as part of God's people. On that day they would

be “reborn” and given a name. And do you know what you’ll find if you dig in ancient churches from the earliest centuries of the church in places like Greece, Syria or Turkey? You’ll find 8-sided baptismal fonts, a conscious nod to the 8-day-old Old Testament baby becoming part of God’s family by circumcision – because today our newborn babies receive the blessing of forgiveness when they are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God makes them a promise! We don’t keep them away – baptism of babies might just be the most beautiful picture of how limitless God’s love is. As a baby passively, ignorantly does absolutely nothing they receive a love unbound by limits or loopholes. Jesus’ limitless love breaks through restrictions that would stop a person from receiving His blessing in baptism.

Jesus inviting the children to come to Him may not be about baptism, but wow, is baptism about Jesus inviting little children to come to Him – and those of the same sort – like little children, falling short of the glory of God. Like little children, unimpressive in our stature or prominence, unable to satisfy God by watching the line and minding the loopholes. Like little children, dependent, passive recipients of a gift we had no part whatsoever in acquiring. Like children, bringing nothing to the table and receiving a blessing from God to be forgiven, adopted into His family and given the promise to live with our God forever. In Jesus’ name, Amen.