

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 3-4, 2009
Mark 10:2-16

Stewardship Series Part 1: “The Stewardship of Relationships”

It's autumn: the air is cool, leaves are starting to change, and high overhead the geese are honking as we see them flying south to warmer climates for the winter. But why do they fly in that V-shaped formation? You probably know already: by flying together in that famous V-formation they help each other. When one bird flies at the tip of the V, it cuts air resistance and creates air lift to those flying behind it. By flying together the whole flock creates 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew alone. One goose cannot be at the tip of the V for the whole trip, so the geese take turns so no one goose is pushed too hard. When one goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of flying alone. It quickly falls back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird flying in front of it. Flying is hard work, so the geese honk at each other to encourage one another to keep it up! When a goose gets sick, wounded, or is shot down, two other geese fall out of formation and drop down to follow and protect their fallen comrade. They stay with the sick or wounded goose until it either recovers or dies. If it recovers, the other two geese fly with it and join up with another flock or catch up with their own. (taken from Leadership Lessons from Geese at www.thepracticeofleadership.net). There are some real lessons about relationships and caring for each other that we can learn from God's creatures here! It is relationships that are before us in today's Scripture lessons as we begin a four-part series on Christian stewardship under the theme "The Stewardship of Relationships." May the Lord's rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of God's Word, for Jesus' sake.

First, what exactly is Christian stewardship? Turn to the first page of your bulletin and read with me a definition for this: "Christian stewardship is the free and joyous activity of the child of God and God's family, the church, in managing all of life and life's resources for God's purposes." All of life and life's resources, it says. Certainly one of life's greatest blessings and most valuable resources is relationships. The Old Testament lesson (Genesis 2:1-24) speaks of how we were created to be in relationship with God and with one another. In the entire account of God's creation, here is the only thing that is *not* good: "**The Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner'**" (Genesis 2:18). God created man and woman for each other, and this coming together is the foundation of what God's design and purpose for marriage is all about. For many, this blissful story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden seems almost like a fairy tale – innocent and idealistic. Marriage and family life today seem a far cry from this, even among God's people. If we were to read a bit beyond today's lesson, we would see how quickly God's gracious and loving plan was shattered and broken. Instead of listening to God, Adam and Eve listened to another voice, the voice of the tempter. Very quickly, things went bad. Shame and guilt, finger-pointing and blaming overtook love and concern for the other person. Jealousy and anger soon gave birth to violence and murder. God's beautiful creation was plunged into a horrendous downward self-destructing spiral. We still live with the painful effects of what Scripture calls sin – a twisting and perversion of God's original plan for us and for all creation. How do we reclaim God's plan? How do we reclaim the stewardship of relationships – of husband and wife, of parents and children, of family and friends?

Next Friday evening, a wedding will take place at this very altar. The following words from the Marriage Service will be read, and I think they are some of the most truthful and beautiful words about marriage I have ever heard: "The Lord God in his goodness created us male and female, and by the gift of marriage founded human community in a joy that begins now and is brought to perfection in the life to come. Because of sin, our age-old rebellion, the gladness of marriage can be overcast, and the gift of the family can become a burden. But because God who established marriage, continues to bless it with his abundant and ever-present support, we can be sustained in our weariness and have our joy restored"

(*Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 203). Though the world and our own lives at times seem like they are spinning out of control, there is hope for us because Jesus has entered into our broken world and into our broken lives. Jesus has come into our brokenness – our shame and guilt, our finger-pointing and blaming, our jealousy and anger, our violence in thought, word and deed. He took all of that, the evil we have done and the good we have failed to do, and he paid the price for us all, from Adam and Eve’s first disobedience to our own today. Through his cleansing blood, we are redeemed; we are a new creation. Jesus is our sacrifice for sin, and he is also our model for the godly life. And this is where the stewardship of relationships begins for us: at the cross. If God so loved us that he did not spare the life of his only Son, then we are called to love and care for one another as God in Christ has love and cared for us.

In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus has some challenging words for us about marriage and divorce. He tells us that divorce was not part of God’s original design, but came through Moses who allowed it because of the people’s hardness of heart. Thousands of years later, marriages still don’t always work out. Divorce happens, even with faithful Christian people. Divorce is often painful and messy, even under the best of circumstances. The question asked of Jesus in the Gospel lesson was meant to be a trick question; to trip Jesus up and get him in trouble. Jesus exposes the ugly truth of human sin trying to justify itself over against God’s truth. Today, the culture around us is trying to redefine marriage as not just between a man and woman, but between two men or two women. The last place I ever thought this would happen is my home state of Iowa, and yet it is now legal there for a man to marry a man and a woman to marry a woman. Numerous church bodies have already announced their support of this, as well as accepting openly homosexual clergy who are in committed relationships. Nowhere in Scripture can there be found anything remotely supporting this. Our guide and compass must be the Word of God, not popular culture. That same popular culture would have us believe that it is a very good thing for couples to live together before marriage. It is now the exception to the rule for couples *not* to live together before marriage. The thinking is that they should find out if they are compatible and suited for each other. This is not God-pleasing and undermines God’s gift of marriage. Again, our guide and compass must be the Word of God, not popular culture. The stewardship of relationships may call us to speak the truth in love to the ones we love.

In today’s Epistle lesson (Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12), we read: “**As it is, we do not see everything in subjection to them [angels], but we do see Jesus**” (Hebrews 2:8-9). Because our stewardship of relationships leaves so much to be desired, because how we interact and treat others falls far short of God’s design for us, we have a very deep need to see Jesus. Though we have not loved family as we should, we do see Jesus. Though our stewardship of relationships may be based on selfishness and hardness of heart, we do see Jesus. We see Jesus, who stretched out his arms on the cross to take our sin upon himself, so that we might be recreated and transformed into something new – little children, as he tells us: “**Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it**” (Mark 10:15). Because we do see Jesus, with child-like trust we will love and care for each other as we exercise the stewardship of relationships,. May God help us to do this for Jesus’ sake. Amen.