**19 Pentecost, Oct. 7, 2012, Mark 10: 2-16, The Rev. Mary Trainor**

When I was a child, my sisters and I would enjoy watching the TV show, "**Leave it to Beaver.**" Maybe some of you remember that show? In it, we saw family life in the Cleaver home. The parents June and Ward were always getting along, and always conscientious as parents to their boys Beaver and Wally. Oh, the Beav and Wally were always getting into trouble -- but the family life was harmonious and fun. Ward would come home from the office in the evenings to find June, with her hair just perfect and she was wearing well ironed dress and pearls, happily vacuuming while the dinner was cooking in the oven. "Yummm" said Ward as he walks by June giving her a kiss on the cheek, "something smells good!" That is what family life is like, right? Well, in some case families were like the Cleavers -- but most not. Nowadays, we have very different types of families on TV. The popular comedy "**Modern Family**" is billed as being about "the evolving nature of what constitutes family in our day and age." It is a series about [Jay Pritchett](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Modern_Family_characters#Jay_Pritchett), his second wife and step son as well as his two children, and their families. This series shows a very different view about what family than "Leave it to Beaver" did. Our understanding of what a family constitutes is much broader than it was back then.

Today's Gospel theme is: family life, and in it we learn what Jesus says about family...specifically about marriage and children. This really hits home for me personally, because in the past three months, two of my children were joined in marriage. During both of those ceremonies the words of Jesus from today's Gospel were said, ***"Therefore what God has joined together, let no man put asunder***." These famous words are Jesus' words from today's Gospel. Jesus is saying that human beings should not rupture what God unites. Hmmm....we live in a broken world, with half of the marriages in this country ending in divorce. This is a Gospel passage that many preachers skip, because it is so difficult to hear and talk about. In fact, this passage appears prominently in the theology book entitled, "The Difficult Sayings of Jesus." Divorce touches all of us in some way or another, and it is painful - but it is also a reality here in the 21st century! Talking about this passage feels a bit like running through a field of thistles -- but please know that once we plow through it, good news, awaits us at the other end.

The context of this Gospel passage is important in understanding it. Jesus is with the Pharisees, who are trying to trap Him in a legal quagmire -- they want to get him to say something that will get Him arrested by the Romans. Jesus sees their strategy, and takes the discussion to a higher place - to God. Marriage is sacred. Marriage is not only between the man and woman getting married, it is between the couple and God; God is the third person in the relationship. Look at page 423 in the Book of Common Prayer -- you can see in our Marriage liturgy that **"the bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation...it signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church....and therefore marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God."** Ok, so this is what Jesus is trying to get across in the culture of that day, which turns out was full of men divorcing their wives (women did not have that right). The law then said that a man could legally divorce his wife (for no reason at all-like maybe he did not like her cooking), and abandon both her and the children. Back then, there was no alimony or child support required--so the streets were full of homeless, destitute women and children! It is in this context that Jesus speaks against divorce. Jesus is against divorce, and in particular its effect on the women and children left behind. Marriage does not only concern the two people, for it affects others too: especially children, if there are any, as they are totally dependent upon the parents.

But wait - what about the "D" word? What if there are problems in the marriage? Does this Gospel condemn people who have gotten divorced and remarried? No, because with Jesus Christ the law of compassion is the highest law. Divorce is not the greatest evil. We live in a broken world. God understands that we are not perfect, that we make mistakes, that we sometimes marry the wrong person or that things can go very wrong in a marriage. Even Christians fall short. In some cases after trying hard to patch things up and counseling, it is better for a marriage to end. God does not mean for harmful relationships to continue. Divorce causes pain and leaves people vulnerable. Marriage should not just be thrown away. Jesus' teachings here have two messages for us: marriage is sacred and a marriage should be worked on and kept together if possible, and if divorce is necessary both men and women have rights, and as part of the divorce all parties (especially women and children) should be cared for -- not abandoned to the streets.

Let me share with you a statistic that you may not have heard of before. About 50% of all marriages end in divorce - and that percentage is about the same for people who claim to be Christian. But, the divorce rate for Christian couples who **pray together regularly** is only about 1%: 50 times less than it is in the general population. Isn't God doing something in our lives when we invite Him in?

Back to the Gospel. In this scene, we not only see the Pharisees unsuccessfully trying to trap Jesus in a legal net but we also see the disciples being incredibly uncaring. The scene was crowded and busy, for in addition to Jesus, the disciples and Pharisees there were lots of people - couples with children, children who the parents wanted Jesus to bless. The Gospel said, "***People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that He might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them."*** The disciples here are actively preventing the children from coming to Jesus or from Jesus from blessing them. Jesus is not happy about this, and responds by saying, "***let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.***" Why is Jesus upset with the disciples' refusal to allow the children to come to him? The answer is that Jesus is troubled by his disciples' behavior because it indicates that they do not understand the ministry of Jesus Himself; and they do not understand the importance of the need for children to come to the Savior. To discourage people who bring others to Jesus runs counter to Christ's whole plan for the church and its ministry of evangelismfor all time. Jesus' message of salvation is always just one generation away from disappearing from the face of the earth. To kill the message of Jesus, all you have to do is simply not tell it to your children or other family members.

Here at St. John's, we have an old painting in the Hall near the kitchen showing his scene of Jesus surrounded with the little children, with Jesus gently caring for them. Jesus is saying here that children are really important to God. Children are an integral part of God's plans for all his people. And, a message for us here is that because they are important to God, taking good care of these precious ones and leading them in His ways needs to be important to us. This does not only apply to those of us with small children, but to all of us. So, the positive message today is that Christ is actively present in the middle of our marriages and families, but we need to invite Him there through prayer. Today's gospel's *good news* is that in spite of our inabilities, our limits and failures, God is limitlessly loving and always faithful. God is a God of compassion and forgiveness. Together, let us pray the prayer for families, #45 on page 828 in the Book of Common Prayer: **Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who settest the solitary in families: We commend to thy continual care the homes in which thy people dwell. Put far from them, we beseech thee, every root of bitterness, the desire of vainglory, and the pride of life. Fill them with faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness. Knit together in constant affection those who, in holy wedlock, have been made one flesh. Turn the hearts of the parents to the children, and the hearts of the children to the parents; and so enkindle fervent charity among us all, that we may evermore be kindly affectioned one to another; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**