

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Marriage and family are front and center in our Old Testament and Gospel texts today. Their timeliness is surely not missed by anyone today. The pope was just in the US a week ago, and his purpose was to attend the World Meeting of Families. While here, he spoke before Congress, and though for me he could have said more, he could have been a bit more forthright, nevertheless, he did say to them and to the other governmental powerbrokers (including some of the justices of the Supreme Court), *“It is my wish that throughout my visit the family should be a recurrent theme. How essential the family has been to the building of this country! And how worthy it remains of our support and encouragement! Yet I cannot hide my concern for the family, which is threatened, perhaps as never before, from within and without. Fundamental relationships are being called into question, as is the very basis of marriage and the family. I can only reiterate the importance and, above all, the richness and the beauty of family life.”*

Certainly marriage and the family have been on our minds for some time. The family has been under assault for some time. The outrageous and poorly-reasoned Obergefell decision by the Supreme Court this past June is just the latest skirmish in the cultural battles in our country that have harmed the family, but it was under assault long before that. A decline in marriage coupled with easier and more frequent divorce have hurt families. Sexual permissiveness leading to cohabitation, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, abortion, absentee fathers, and single parent homes has been harmful to families. The gay marriage movement has been harmful to families. Dr. Ryan Anderson in his new book, *Truth Overruled*, writes, *“Perhaps you’ve heard that it makes ‘no difference’ for children whether they are raised by a same-sex couple or by their married mom and dad. Don’t believe it. ... The scientifically rigorous studies of same-sex parenting all conclude that as a rule, the best place for children is in the home of their married mother and father.”*

But I’m not here to moralize about these topics today—that’s a word that usually has the adjective “self-righteous” before it. Pastors are surely accused, if not to their face, then in hushed voices behind their backs, of *“self-righteous moralizing.”* But that’s not my intent today or any day. I’m here to repent with you of my own failures when it comes to upholding the family and to be forgiven with all of you.

Now I find it interesting that in the Gospel today, the very people that come to Jesus to test Him about His teaching with regard to marriage and divorce are the (we use this adjective with them, too) self-righteous Pharisees. And they’re not trying to preserve the sanctity of marriage. They’re seeking affirmation from Jesus

that their practice of giving a woman a divorce for any old reason was “okay” — that God approves.

Jesus was far from approving. He quoted Moses’ institution of marriage in the beginning in the garden: “*‘the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.*”

And lest you misunderstand, a bit later in the house, Jesus continued: “*Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.*” Sins compounding on top of sins! God is not happy with divorce. He is not happy when someone swings a wrecking ball into the house He has built. And so, we should do all we can within our own marriages and encouraging others in their marriages to seek reconciliation constantly, asking for and receiving forgiveness for sins committed one against another.

This is what makes the Bible so hard—because it contains God’s uncompromising standard of what is right, and it does not waver. But Pastor, she’s gained 20 pounds; Pastor, he’s now bald; Pastor, he doesn’t help around the house; Pastor, she burns the toast; Pastor, I’m not happy—God wants me to be happy, doesn’t He? Pastor, I’ve fallen out of love. I want a divorce.

“*Can I get a divorce for these reasons?*” The fact is, legally you can, and for no reason at all. You just have “*to tell the court that the marriage is ‘irretrievably broken’ ... [and] there is really nothing the other spouse can do to stop*” it. But this is Pharisee kind of thinking that we heard about in the Gospel, that Jesus corrects. And the brokenness doesn’t stop with the divorce. If there are children involved, they are harmed—long term. The family is harmed.

Modern society has been living a fantasy, believing myths with regard to marriage and divorce. Judith Wallerstein’s 25 year study of divorce bears witness to this. One myth, she says, has been that “*if the parents are happier the children will be happier, too. Even if the children are distressed by the divorce, the crises will be transient because children are resilient and resourceful and will soon recover.*” It’s a myth; mostly false. A second myth that Wallerstein highlights is “*based on the premise that divorce is a temporary crisis that exerts its most harmful effects on parents and children at the time of the breakup.*” So, we think “*the key to the child’s adjustment is the settlement of conflict without rancor.*” If the divorce is amicable, we think, everything will be okay. False again.

The problem is the divorce itself, that which God, who knows what is best for us, forbids saying, “*What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.*” Let us listen to God rather than following the example of the Pharisees and trying to justify sinful divorce and actions that harm the family. Let us rather

repent, and seek forgiveness, knowing that there is forgiveness even for divorce and other sexual sins that God forbids in the 6th commandment. Let us not rewrite God's law, trying to refashion sin into "not-a-sin." Let us rather acknowledge God's perfect word in our lives, repent when we fail, and hear absolution through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

For in God's desire to save us, He was not ashamed to send His Son from heaven, into our world, to be called our brother, to become a part of our family. He was made like us, His brothers, in every respect. He domiciled for 9 months in a womb, just like you and I did, being born finally into a family, so that this "*Son of the Most High*" God would humble Himself to be "*born in the likeness of men,*" born of a virgin and given the name Immanuel, "*God with us.*"

Jesus was raised in a family with His mother Mary and His stepfather and guardian Joseph, with brothers and sisters, and yet with all mankind in mind as truly His family, His mother and brothers and sisters. As it was not good for the first Adam to be alone, and so God made Eve, and instituted marriage, and in their one-flesh union brought forth children as "*a heritage from the Lord,*" so the second Adam was not alone as He entered into this world, for He entered into this heritage, into a family, a royal family, the house and lineage of David, and into a priestly order, the order of Melchizedek, "*so that [for our sake] he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*"

That is, our brother in flesh and blood would also partake of that curse of sin, which is death, cursed by being hung from a tree, bearing our sins, that by His death He might destroy him who has the power of death, the devil, free us from the fear of death, and deliver us from "*the law of sin and death*" to life.

For the second Adam did not enter into this world to remain alone, but to take unto Himself a Bride, His Church, sanctifying her by His priestly service as He offered up Himself for her, a bloody sacrifice not for His sins but for hers—that is, for yours. And desiring that His Bride might be arrayed "*in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish,*" Jesus gave His Bride a washing of water with the word, that He might present her to Himself in just this way, that He might build her into a family, a spiritual house.

But unlike us, this Bridegroom will not forsake His Bride — divorce is not in the picture for Him. He is faithful, even when we are not. He always seeks reconciliation. He is always ready to forgive. Though it may seem as if steeples are falling and families are under assault, He does not use the wrecking ball on His house in order to build a new one. Rather, gathered here in His house, as His house, we recline at table and are fed by our brother, who offers up His flesh as

true food and His blood as true drink, who not only strengthens our familial bond, which is faith, but who also strengthens us “*to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*”

The pope is right in his concern for the threats to the family. We Lutherans are, too, for strong families are the foundation of strong societies. But we also take heart amidst increasing attacks upon the family and upon Christ’s Church, for we know the Lord is building the house, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself the chief cornerstone. Therefore, we know: His labors are not in vain, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.