A SERMON BY REV. MARCUS FELDE, PH.D., PASTOR OF BETHELHEM LUTHERAN CHURCH, INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA

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A SERMON FOR THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 7, 2012

Text: Mark 10:2-16

Do you see what I see, between verses 12 and 13 of today’s Gospel reading? A cataclysmic shift.

In the first part of our reading, Jesus is teaching the people about the topic of divorce. He is adamant—there is no excuse for divorce. He teaches an unequivocal, absolute message: Divorce is wrong. He is much more harsh even than Moses, who gave people some wiggle room.

Then, starting at verse 13, Jesus talks in the kindliest fashion about how easy, how simple it is to come into the kingdom of God. It is, he says, sort of like when a child just comes up and sits on your lap. In fact, that’s the only way people can come into the kingdom. Simply, naively, trustingly, to respond to God’s gracious invitation.

Is this Jekyll and Hyde?

Do you hear gears being stripped, as Jesus shifts his car from forward into reverse?

Why is he so strict ethically, and yet so sure of God’s hospitality towards his people?

Jesus does not only preach the high-bar requirements about divorce, of course. He talks the same way about every aspect of God’s holy law. There are no exceptions. No quibbles. No reservations. You must simply pay your taxes. Forgive. Don’t even think about doing wrong, because thinking about it is as bad as doing it. On the other hand, “Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest!”

Doesn’t he know that the biggest burden we have is meeting God’s high standards for our lives? Always having to be loving and all that?

One minute, you think Jesus is a hyperPharisee. The next, he changes and talks like an anti-Pharisee!

It makes me think of the Copernican Revolution.

I’m not an expert in astronomy—I fell asleep in the planetarium once, during astronomy class—but let me share how I understand the Copernican Revolution.

With the diagrams of Ptolemy, the ancient Greek, everything in the sky was seen as going around the earth. The earth was the center of the universe, and like the sun and moon (which apparently go around the earth), all the planets and everything else go in circles around us.

Except that, to account for small discrepancies in the results of this theory, Ptolemy and others had to devise “epicycles” which were slight modifications to the circular orbits. Mars went around Earth in a circle, but at some point it played loop-de-loop, then resumed its circular orbit. Epicycles were like loopholes or escape clauses in the theory. They made it work by adding extra explanations.
Copernicus said, Let’s see how it works if we think of the Sun as being at the center, with all the planets—including Earth!—going around the Sun. This was radical! Thus was created the idea of the Solar System. Not that the earth started for the first time to orbit around the Sun, but that for the first time we realized it. With the help of later astronomers, the theory was cleared up. All the epicycles were swept away. It took a while, but eventually we got it.

What happens between verses 12 and 13 in this lesson is like the Copernican Revolution. The difference between the Gospel and the Law of God is as fundamental, in its own way, as the difference between Ptolemaic and Copernican ways of understanding planetary motion.

The Law of God is holy, and tells us how we should be. Good. That’s not too hard to see. But as sinners, when we are exposed to the Law, we immediately begin to feel the difficulty of it. Trying to be good is not easy. Divorce, for example, is something that happens when people are in terrible straits. They are truly suffering, from the loss of love and much else. How can such people possibly be good? If they are going to be good according to the view of the Law, the only way to be good is to invent some epicycles or loopholes that make them feel right about the divorce. E.g., as Moses told them, give a proper certificate of dismissal and divorce her. The same happens with every other sort of Law, when we are convicted by it. We ask God, “Can I hit my brother after I’ve forgiven him seven times?” Jesus says, “No. Not ever.” We devise loophole after loophole, excuse after excuse, all in the name of putting ourselves back in the right, after slipping into the wrong.

Because we are imperfect, i.e., sinners, the Law is not something that can get us out of the dilemma into which the Law has plunged us.

The Gospel, on the other hand, is a Word from God which cuts through all our imperfectness, the incompletion or devastation of our lives, and simply extends a hand to pull us up and out. The Gospel says not “Try that extra bit harder,” but “Simply come to me, as you are.”

When we live our lives under the aegis of the Law, we will always find ourselves seeking bargains with God (“How about if I give you Sunday morning plus three hours?”) Or excusing (“But the woman you gave me, she offered it to me,” Adam said). Or rationalizing (“In the end, it all worked out for the better for everyone!”) Or boasting (“I thank you, God, that I am not like others,” prayed the Pharisee in the temple).

Life is different when we live our lives out of the Gospel, simply accepting—as people who are just as much a part of the problem as others—that God still loves us and is calling us to live in relationship with him and accept the hope he promises to us.

I heard a wonderful illustration of this once, this childlike receptivity to God’s grace and goodness. A Sunday School teacher at Olean sometimes looked after her granddaughter, who was four years old. One day, Megan stepped out the front door of Grandma’s farmhouse, on the top of a hill with a great view of woods and fields and barns and cattle and farm equipment
and blue sky and clouds. It was what we call a great day. And Megan opened her arms rather dramatically, exclaiming to her Grandma: “And to think that God made all of this!”

That is as great a confession of faith as Psalm 8, which we read today. “When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have set in their courses, what are we that you should be mindful of us?”

Sadly, it is rare for people to open their arms and look at the human creation, the population of the world, and exclaim with loving awe, “And to think that you made all of these!” We are much less impressed with humanity than we are with the rest of creation. For a good reason.

And yet, love them God does. In Jesus Christ specifically, God opens his arms to all humanity, even though we are all mixed up, and says “Come up here and sit on my knee.” The Love of God is given to us without stint, without measure, in spite of and not because of our relationship with the Law of God.

The Copernican Revolution took a long time. It was hard for the world to let go of the idea that it is all about us. It is also hard for people to let go of the notion that we were born to live for ourselves. We tend to open our arms and look at the good things of this world and say “And to think that I have the opportunity to grab as much of this as I can for as long as I can manage! Let me at it!”

No, the blinkers have come off our eyes because of Jesus Christ and his death for us. That is not how it is. It is so much better. Amen.