

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

What God Has Joined Together, Let No One Separate

Mark 10:9

October 3, 2021

Jesus says, “What God has joined together let no one separate.” I’ve been mulling over that line for quite a while now and would like for us to consider it again this morning, though in a way that’s not exactly the context in which the line is given. In its context, it’s about marriage and divorce, but I’d like to look wider at what it says to us about our relationships with all Creation. What God has joined together, all that God has intended to be joined in relationship, let us not be quick to separate. Let us consider that, especially today along with St. Francis of Assisi who took such delight in the kinship of all creatures and how we belong to one another.

Before we head that direction, I do want to acknowledge the context of the verse. It is about marriage and divorce. Jesus, asked a question about the legality of divorce, responds that God intended marriage to be a forever-union, but the law of Moses does provide a way to divorce because of your hardness of hearts. I’ve seen hard hearts in marriages, and I’ve seen them in divorces. But what I’ve seen most of all are broken hearts. I know full well that some hearts are broken because of the hard heartedness of another person. And I know that even hard hearts can shatter. What I’m saying is that while Jesus recognizes the high stakes of marriage, so very high, so very sacred, there’s also a recognition that life and marriage is complex and sometimes there are no pain-free paths forward. Continuing a marriage in peril will not be pain free. Divorce definitely isn’t a pain free path. And putting the pieces of life and hearts back together after a divorce is an emotional, spiritual, relational journey of healing and renewal.

That Jesus immediately follows this by calling little children to come to him may show us where our priorities and attention should be. There’s so much more that could be said about marriage, and divorce, and children. Some of those things are so very sad; but some are happy too. Some are so very happy—and not just marriages that float along in bliss through the years, in affection as sweet as icing on the wedding cake, but in those where the pieces all shattered, and then by steadfastness, and prayer, and sometimes a lot of work, they were pieced back together. Those are great stories.

And it’s that kind of redemption story that we should keep in mind if we turn our attention toward what God intended to be joined in relationship. Certainly, thinking as specifically as about a marriage, but also thinking wider about all creation, we need stories of redemption, and reconciliation, and recovery, and re-creation, and renewal of our lives, our spirituality, our communities, and our relationship with God and all creation. If there is going to be a future story for us and for our children and for all critters of our God and king, we need a reconciliation, a healing of the rifts of all that we humans have torn apart.

I guess that can seem like a distant world away from the very personal, very tender concerns about marriage, children, and divorce. But I’m not sure it’s all that different. Divorce may be

just the right word to describe the relationship humans now have with God's creation. We've separated ourselves; we've distanced ourselves; we've filed for divorce from the limits and gifts of creation's order; humans have created rifts in the relationships and cycles of creation through our treatment of the soil, and water, and air. We've done so without most of us hardly even realizing it and for the most not intending it. That's how relationships usually are severed—without realization and without intention, and yet you find yourself a chasm away from where you should have been and wonder: how did we get *here*?

No one set out to wreck the environment. I don't think anyone did anyway. Instead, they set out to find a way to heat homes and power engines and feed millions and generally give a more comfortable life for more and more people who drive to work, and clothe their children, and drink water from plastic bottles, and just basically do normal life, or what now is normal life. I don't think there's a nefarious plot afoot by Big Oil to fill the atmosphere with carbon, or Big Farm to destroy the health of soil, or Big Lumber to cut down the Amazon because they hate trees. But that doesn't mean the results are any different. The atmosphere is dangerously increasing in carbon causing heat to be trapped and temperatures to rise. And industrial farming has treated the soil like a prop to hold up corn stalks instead of a biodiverse community of creatures working in symbiotic relationship. And forests are being cut down at a pace that makes your heart break. And you know the rest, glaciers are calving, species are going extinct, rivers are going dry, and over the next 50 years, it is projected that 1.2 billion humans may have to leave their homes and become immigrants significantly because of all of this. Listen, this is a real and daunting situation we have collectively brought into being and for which we are collectively responsible.

We could leave it at that or we could go on and on and on detailing the cascading ecological crises that have become and are going to become reality as a direct result of human separation from our place in creation. And we could feel guilty about it, and maybe even shamed about it, or angry, or despair. I don't think any of those responses are the end goal, but what is?

Sixty years ago, Joseph Sittler wrote, "It is difficult but possible to get people to understand that pollution is biologically disastrous, aesthetically offensive . . . economically self-destructive, and socially reductive of the quality of human life. . . ." Basically, he's saying people from all walks of life have a capacity to understand environmental problems. But Christians should go even further. Sittler wrote, "From a Christian point of view the ecological crisis presents us not simply with moral tasks but requires of us a freshly renovated and fundamental theology of [creation, its source and its sustenance and its purpose.]" The word essential to such renovation is not the social, aesthetic, economic, or even scientific word, but the Christian word — blasphemy!"

One end goal is to be awakened to what's at stake in our collective rift with creation. Blasphemy. You remember that old word, right? Showing contempt or lack of reverence for God; it's an insult to God. That's blasphemy. It is blasphemous what we have done and are doing to the planet by a thousand curses. We are taking the Lord's name in vain when we praise the God of creation and then turn our backs on that which and those whom God created and called good and beautiful and beloved. We take the Lord's name in vain when we sing all

creatures of our God and king, lift up your voice and with us sing, and then turn our backs on those very same creatures.

So, if we are to heal these rifts, we need a spiritual guide not just a strategic plan or government spending or new technology or protest marches though governments and innovation and public demonstrations have their place. We need a spiritual leader who helps us discover the way, not just his or her way, but our own way in God's way. We are waiting for such a one, not a new Al Gore or Greta Thunberg, or Elon Musk, but a new and altogether different, St. Francis of Assisi. Gore's politics, Thunberg's protests, Musk's technologies all may have their place, but we need a spiritual revolution, one that captures our hearts and our renews our worship and true love of God in Jesus. We need a Francis.

Francis died late on the evening of October 3, 1226, 795 years ago tonight. Every day and every night Christians who make pilgrimage to Assisi kneel at his tomb encircled as it is by the tombs of his closest friends all buried around him. Francis loved people and people loved him. They flocked to him. They still do. Christians all over the world, from every tradition, celebrate a Feast of Francis on October 4 each year. The ecumenical season of creation culminates with this Feast. You might think of our Covenant Day meal next Sunday afternoon as our version of a Francis Feast. Or you might have your own tomorrow night. Or why not both?!

Francis does not have an ecological strategy to reduce carbon emissions in the atmosphere and solve the problem of global warming. Francis does not have a biochemical background sufficient to explain the chemical and biological processes with maintaining good soil. Francis does not have a solution for how to save forests or solve poverty or work toward eco-justice. Those are all part of our work and Francis doesn't exactly show us the way through all this complexity.

But Francis gives us a song to begin. And that's a great place to begin. All the stories about Francis say he was always singing. They called him God's troubadour. There was always a song on his heart. At the end of his life, when he was almost blind, he wrote a song we know as All creatures of our God and king, lift up your voice and with us sing. O praise him, Alleluia. Those aren't exactly his words, but that's the song we know adapted from his Cantic of the Creatures. In the Cantic all creatures all called on to lift their voices to God: the sun, the moon, water, wind, fire. He calls them brother and sister. So it's not just the sun, a burning ball of gas, but Brother Sun, and it's not just the moon, a lifeless inert satellite of the earth, but sister moon. Sister water, brother fire. In his heart, we are all brothers and sisters with one another in God's family. One of the lines he added later was about reconciliation between people not getting long. Apparently the mayor and bishop of Assisi really, really didn't like each other. Francis added a line to the song and sent it to them. Legend has it they reconciled. There's hope for us all.

We need a new St. Francis, not just as a person, but as a community, a communal St. Francis who together lift up their voice and sing praises, and who learn to rediscover what has been

separated from their lives—their essential place in the world into which Jesus was incarnate and for which he died.

Francis didn't love nature for nature's sake. He loved Jesus and saw God in Christ everywhere he looked. His contemplative vision didn't take place in a darkened room with eyes closed, but in the forest with the birds, with his brothers and sisters, and with the poor, the lepers, those most dependent on others for life.

As we remember his life today, our eyes turn to Jesus who said he is made known in the breaking of bread and in the faces of the hungry and thirsty and those who have no home, and who said he is with us, all around. God's mercy all around. Let us have eyes to see again. Let us have hearts to feel again, to break and then to be healed and made whole. Let our lives be renewed in the joy of the Lord.

It is now, as of today, 5 years until the 800th anniversary of Francis death. What if we see these five years as an invitation toward healing our rifts with creation? Specifically, by October 4, 2026, what's possible, specifically on this campus, on these grounds, as a place of renewal in meaningful ways in worship, hospitality, community, good stewardship of this gift. Over the next few weeks, mostly on Wednesday evenings, I'm going to be thinking about these things and invite you to join me as we do so. I'm dreaming about open spaces and prairie grass, trees and prayer trails, going carbon neutral and being a certified wildlife habitat, a big ol' community compost site and veggies to share. Goodness, there's so many opportunities out here. And, also, together with it all, a place for us to share meals and life together, to feast around a table set with the bounty of God's goodness in the wideness of God's grace. It's time. We need that too. I can already imagine October 4, 2026, which is a Sunday, a feast in honor of St. Francis in our beautiful Assisi Hall—we definitely don't have to call it that—our refractory—we also don't have to call it that, our fellowship hall—we definitely don't have to call it that either. I'm not good at naming things.

So, for now let's just hold in our hearts space for a place of hospitality and renewal and thanksgiving, our common home. I'm so very grateful for this journey we have been on and the paths before us. And along with those disciples gathered together on that Easter night and those on the road to Emmaus, for Jesus made known to us by scars and wounds made whole, by death made life, and in the breaking of bread, in its giving and receiving. May he and his life in us be renewed by those same scars—his and ours, the same bread he broke and that which we break, and by the Spirit by whom Christ is with us even now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.