**Text**: **Mark 10: 2-16**

**The Bethel Pulpit**

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**Theme: “God Cares for the Weak and Powerless”**

Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Renowned preacher and teacher Barbara Brown Taylor and her husband, Ed, have a small Georgia farm. The Taylors raise baby chicks, which gives Pastor Barbara insight into the weakness of new life coming into being. Sitting and watching a group of chicks in the incubator struggle out of their eggs leads her to reflect on the fragility of life, both for young chicks and humans. She writes: “One would-be chick, trapped half-in and half-out of its shell, looked like it couldn't possibly survive. “Suddenly I saw something remarkable happen to the little chick: she laid her head down on the plastic shelf of the incubator and did not try any more. Figuring she was a goner, my husband, Ed, lifted the shell--contents and all-- and placed her in the straw-lined wooden box with her siblings. Huddled under a 60-watt light bulb, they were in constant motion, all climbing on top of one another as they each tried to crawl closest to the light. When the trapped would-be chick heard them cheeping, she cheeped, too, and the heads of the others swiveled in her direction. Then they called to her and the sound galvanized her. She lifted her head from the straw, shuddered all over and heaved free. On orange rubber legs, she staggered over to the pile of warm feathers and dove underneath them, leaving her old shell behind her like a shroud. Weak, though she was, she arrived into the world.’

This is how we all come into the world—helpless, weak, and powerless. We need the help of others even to survive. But somehow, we do enter and survive. Sometimes, we even thrive in this world. We do not do this purely by our own resources. We need other hu-mans, calling us out and holding us up when we lose strength along the way. God gives us human beings, who though weak, can care for one another. We are made for relationship. As the writer of Genesis says, we need “helpers as our partners.” But we also need God’s help, God’s strength, God’s love. For when we falter or fall, God holds us up. For God loves us as we are, weak and vulnerable. God calls all of us—men, women, and children-- to care for one another as equals in God’s sight.

“God Cares for the Weak and Powerless.” We see Jesus demonstrate this both by His teaching and through His actions today. Jesus has just left Capernaum near His home in Galilee and has gone to Judea across the Jordan. There He encounters the Pharisees, the keepers of the Jewish law. They come to him and try to “trump him up.” They ask Jesus a question about divorce that was much debated among Jewish groups of that day: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? “As legalists, they understand from Deuteronomy 24 that “A man may divorce his wife if he finds no favor in his eyes because he has found indecency in her.’” But what does this mean, and why is it so one-sided? There was an ongoing debate at this time between various rabbis. The Jewish law said that only men could divorce. In first century Palestinian society, women—as well as children—were viewed as being ruled by men—some would say their property. But some rabbis said men could divorce women for very little reason.

On the other hand, the Greek society in which they lived in the Roman Empire said that either a man or a woman could divorce the other, only for serious reasons like adultery. Jesus avoids the controversy by driving the question farther back to the essential goodness of creation-- the origin of men and women in society itself. He said: “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

What is Jesus saying here? God cares for all people—women, who are devalued in the society of the time, are just as important to God, as men. Divorce entered the world after the perfect relationships at creation of Genesis 2 when God provided other people as partners. Divorce is a part of the world of sin that none of us can avoid in our fallen nature reflected in Genesis 3. It is part of the choices that human beings make while living in the day to day struggles of the world. Although living in our flawed world relationships do break down and lead to divorce, God loves and cares for all people.

By taking the Pharisees back to the gospel—the grace and goodness of life in community—Jesus is able to get out of the corner they were putting them in. Jesus offers forgiveness for those who experience broken relationships. Nothing in our world and in community life is perfect-- marriages, government, society, and even in churches. We experience brokenness. In the break-up of any relationship there is never one 100% right person. But God is willing to pick up the pieces of brokenness because God cares for all people. God especially cares for the weak and powerless.

This past Thursday Pastor Paul Rohde, campus pastor at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, wrote in the God Pause devotional, “none of us loves perfectly. The gospel is *not* for the perfect and it is hardest on those who think they are. The most helpful quip I received about becoming a parent was, "I raised several perfect children before I had my own."…. Luther taught us to stand truthfully and humbly together. We are united in brokenness and lifted in mercy. This teaching disarms any who may have forgotten their own imperfections. They help us stand together in vulnerability--as all who love are vulnerable. When Jesus blesses the children, there are no perfect children. There are only beloved and forgiven children.” 

In approaching relationships with others, we need to begin by realizing our own shortcomings. Psychology also support this reality. The late psychologist Scott Peck writes (in The Different Drum): “every human being is broken and vulnerable. How strange that we should ordinarily feel compelled to hide our wounds when we are all wounded! Vulnerability is a two-way street. Community requires the ability to expose our wounds and weaknesses to our fellow creatures. It also requires the ability to be affected by the wounds of others, to be wounded by their wounds.... But even more important is the love that arises among us when we share, both ways, our woundedness.”

Jesus approaches people in His life and ministry by beginning with their brokenness. When anyone tries to address contemporary problems in a legalistic fashion, Jesus asks them to look inward. For example, when others wanted to chastise the adulterous woman in John 8 He says. “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.” Before we go off and get all so self-righteous about ourselves, and gloat about our being better than others, let’s look inward. When we do we will see that without God’s grace we are not “the crown of creation” that the Psalmist talked about in Psalm 8. We are weak and powerless when left to ourselves.

“God Cares for the Weak and Powerless”—and that is all of us. To get this point across even further, we have the second part of our lesson for today. The people bring children to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. The disciples shoo them off. But this angers Jesus, and He lets them know it. He says: “Don’t push these children away. Don’t ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. Mark this: Unless you accept God’s kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you’ll never get in.” Then, gathering the children up in his arms, he lays his hands of blessing on them.

This second part of today’s gospel is clearer in terms of humbling us all to seek God through trusting in God’s grace. Jesus is teaching the grown-ups—the adults—the prim and proper Pharisees—about the meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is like Jesus is standing in the front of the adult forum in Good Shepherd Chapel when some parents bring children for a blessing. Famous rabbis, or teachers, of that day would regularly be asked to bless children so that they can grow up and be like them. The disciples just wanted Jesus to not be bothered by “unimportant” children. But Jesus would have none of it. For you see, children are not only important, as Eugene Peterson put it, “they are the very center of life in the kingdom.” In fact, He said, we can all learn from children, for their simple receiving of the blessing with trust in Jesus is a model for all of us to follow.

Jesus cares for children when no one else would. In first century society children were not seen in the first century through rose colored glasses—as I see my grandchildren today. They were seen as “to be seen, and not he heard.” But Jesus could see in children what some have called “star power.” He could see their acceptance of dependence, as well as their trust in others. He sees them as real human beings, and so he blesses them.

God cares for the weak and powerless. That is Good News for us. Because God cares for the weak and powerless, we ought to do the same. When we have reflected on how it feels to be weak and vulnerable in our lives, then we will be compelled to help those in need. Then we will endorse helping those who are without a home to lay their head. We will also reach out to those in need in our midst, those neighbors for whom we are called to care.

God cares for all of us who are weak and powerless. I have experienced this many times in my life One special way was when at St. Olaf College I went with my wife, Pam, to the Faribault, Minnesota, to teach Sunday School to developmentally disabled adults of all ages. One of the students, Kenny, in his early twenties, was our favorite. He particularly made fun of me when I tried to do the project instead of the lesson, saying, “Roger can’t do the project; Pam has to do that.” But he got the message of the gospel. What I remember about him most was how he loved to sing “Jesus Loves Me. His eyes were beaming as he sang, “Jesus loves me! This I Know, for the Bible tells me so; little ones to him belong, they are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so.”

You and I need to “get it” just as Kenny did. In relationship to God we are weak. But as children of God Jesus welcomes us. He provides for us simple gifts-- a morsel of bread and wine that becomes His presence with us and in us, in order to strengthen us in relationship to God and others. As we sing, “Blest Are They, the Lowly Ones, they shall inherit the earth” we rejoice and are glad for we are part of the kingdom of God. May we all realize that we are children of God by grace and receive Jesus like children. Amen.