

Good Gifts
Mark 10:2-16
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I love video games. I've been playing video games since I was a child playing Alpiner on our family's old Texas Instruments TI-99, and over the years I've accumulated a lot of video games and video game-related collectibles. I've got Mario Lego sets, Toejam and Earl action figures, a full size Master Sword and Shield replica from the Legend of Zelda, and today I'm even wearing my Katamari Damacy socks. For years, I kept all my collectibles in perfect condition, displayed in glass cabinets in my office at home, but then we had children. And my children also love video games, and they don't really understand the difference between collectibles and toys. So since having children, a lot of my pristine, mint condition collector's items have become toys, played with and dented and damaged. My books and magazines are now torn and dog-eared, my glass cabinets are covered with little fingerprints, my action figures have become birthday party decorations and bath toys. That's what children do - they wreck stuff. They don't mean to, usually, but they just don't have the patience and the wisdom and the fine motor skills to properly care for precious, fragile things. If you've got kids, you can count on them taking some of the things that are important and precious, and destroying them, because that's just what children do.

Keep that in mind when we read this morning's passage from the gospel of Mark. Jesus is back in Judea, teaching the crowds of onlookers and miracle hunters who have been following him all over the countryside, and once again, there in the crowd, some of his enemies are trying to cause a little trouble. They

pick a hot-button political issue of the day, one of the really divisive issues that was sure to upset people, no matter which side you took in the debate. What are the rules for divorce? What are the admissible grounds to dissolve a marriage, what are the circumstances that would allow a husband to legally walk away from his commitment to his wife? The Pharisees think they are being oh so clever, dragging Jesus down into the mud, forcing him to take a position that will inevitably cause disillusionment and dissension among his followers. They've got the law of Moses memorized, they can quote chapter and verse, they think they've outsmarted Jesus, they've got him just where they want him.

And of course, Jesus knows what they're trying to do, and he turns the tables on them by turning their entire question inside out. His answer to the Pharisees is, in essence, "you're acting like children." God has given you a gift – an incredibly precious gift, the gift of marriage, a way for human beings to practice loving each other with the same kind of self-sacrificial love that God has for humanity. Joined in such unity and harmony that we can catch a glimpse of the kind of unity and harmony that exists within the trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus tells the Pharisees, marriage is an incredibly precious gift from God, and you have made a mess of it. You've slobbered all over it and dunked it in the cat food bowl and thrown it down the stairs, you took this precious gift God has given you and you've destroyed it, smashed it into a thousand pieces. Jesus' enemies are bickering about the rules for marriage and divorce because they're seeing marriage as a game with winners and losers, they're using it as a weapon to try and sow division and dissension between Jesus and his followers, they're taking God's gift and turning it into a mess, something God never intended it to be. And it isn't just them. We do the same. All throughout human history, over and over again, instead of reacting to God's gift with gratitude and reverence, humanity has taken

the gift of marriage and turned it into a means for control, an institution to keep women subservient to men and vulnerable to abuse, a casual contract to be drawn up or dissolved on a whim. Every marriage, in one way or another, falls short of the purposes God intended for us. Right from the beginning of time all the way down to the present, we have made a mess of God's gift, again and again we've failed to treat the gift of marriage with the care and reverence it deserves.

And you might think that God should never have entrusted something so precious and fragile to untrustworthy children such as ourselves. After all, why give children something really valuable or fragile or precious, something that they can't possibly appreciate and will just immediately destroy? But the strange thing is, God knew this was going to happen. God knew he was giving this gift to stubborn, hard-hearted children who wouldn't be able to use that gift in the way it was meant to be used, who would take this precious thing and mess it up. But he still gave us the gift anyway. Even knowing that we couldn't really handle it, knowing exactly what a mess we were going to make with it, God gave us that gift anyway. God even changed the law he gave to Moses to make a concession to our hard-hearted ways. Jesus is speaking some fifteen hundred years after Moses gave the people of Israel the law, and only now is Jesus getting around to telling them that the law has been wrong all this time, that it didn't really reflect God's true plans for what marriage was meant to be. Even when we don't deserve it, even when we make a mess of it, God still chooses to give us precious, beautiful gifts.

And this is true of more than just marriage. Everywhere you look, you can see all these gifts that God has given to us, all these incredibly precious, beautiful gifts God has entrusted to us, and each and every one of those gifts, we have made a mess of them. Each and every gift God gives us, we use to make this world more painful, more ugly, more cruel, more selfish. We use our strength and our

cleverness to accumulate more wealth at the expense of our neighbours, we devise weaponry and technology that we use to destroy our planet and each other. God keeps giving good things to hard-hearted people, and over and over again we misuse and abuse those gifts we have received. And yet God keeps giving. God keeps blessing us. God keeps providing humanity with everything we need to thrive and flourish, even though he already knows we are going to squander those gifts, even though he already knows exactly how hard our hearts truly are, God still chooses to give. God still chooses to bless. Because that's just who God is. God is the giver of life, the giver of love, the giver of every good gift, and again and again, no matter what we might do with those gifts, God still chooses to give.

And when you think of that, it's kind of amazing. God gives us so many gifts, and we immediately mess them up, but God doesn't react by taking back his gifts and locking them up in glass cabinets, telling us we're too immature, too hard-hearted to handle it, he'll try again when we grow up a bit and figure things out. We sometimes get this idea that if we get something wrong, if we mess up and make a mistake, that God is going to cut us off, take back all the gifts and blessings and love that he's given us. We think that the whole point of being a Christian is doing the right thing all the time, using God's gifts to us in exactly the right way because if we don't, we're in trouble – we better use it or we'll lose it. And that's just not true. That's not how God works. If fifteen hundred years of hard-hearted people from Moses to Jesus didn't change God's mind, if another two thousand years of hard-hearted people from Jesus to today didn't change God's mind, if all our hard-hearted mistakes haven't caused God to withdraw his blessings from us so far, then nothing ever will. God's love for us is not dependent on our behavior. God's blessings for us do not rely on us proving ourselves worthy. God sends the rain on the just and the unjust, God blesses us even when

he knows we're going to use those blessings in all the wrong ways, God gives us gifts he knows will end up thrown on the floor and broken into a million pieces, none of that can ever change who God is. God is a God who blesses. God is a God who gives. God knows that we are children, weak and foolish and hard-hearted children who will inevitably mess up and misuse his gifts, but the one thing about children is that they know how to receive. If you give a gift to a child, they will take it, and love it, and use it – maybe not in the right way, maybe not in the way you intended it to be used, but they will always receive, with enthusiasm and joy. Just as it is in God's nature to give, it is in a child's nature to receive, and as God's children, that's who we're meant to be as well. We are meant to receive the gifts our God gives to us in the same way a little child would, with open arms and open heart, to receive that gift with joy. The only thing we have to do is to receive, accept the gift we've been given, stop worrying about how exactly we'll end up using it and just open your arms, open your heart, and receive the kingdom, receive the blessings of God like a little child. God is a God who gives; nothing can stop him from giving rich, abundant blessings to his children, and the only thing that can keep us from enjoying those blessings is when we refuse to receive, when we think we've got everything we need, when we choose not to rely on God's strength and love and life. God's nature is to give, and our nature is to receive.

And that's what we're going to do today. Today, God has a gift for us, a precious gift beyond our understanding. Today we have been given the body and blood of Jesus Christ, tangible signs of his love for us, reminders of what Jesus has accomplished for us when he gave his life on the cross to rescue us from sin and death. And we will never be worthy of this gift. We will never be able to fully understand it, to appreciate it, to treat it with the respect and the devotion and the reverence that it truly deserves. But we don't have to. We just have to receive.

Receive the gift God wants to give you. Receive the kingdom of God like a little child, take it, eat it, and know that in this gift, in every gift, the everlasting love of God is here for you, here for you today and every day of your life, because of who God is, because of what Jesus has done for us, because here in this place our God takes us in his arms and blesses us with everything we need to enter the Kingdom of God. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.