

The 19th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)
October 3, 2021
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Genesis 2:18-21
Psalm 8
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

Church building closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: the church is open at www.trinitybend.org.

This morning's readings are, to say the least, challenging. And they have been all-too-often weaponized – used against those who can least sustain the assault. The Lutheran pastor and commentator David Lose makes this observation about this morning's gospel:

The passage is often listed among the “hard sayings” of Jesus. But perhaps “painful,” “distressing,” or “agonizing” would be more like it, as each time this passage is read and heard in a congregation many of us cringe, either feeling assaulted by it directly or worrying that others are. A parishioner once told me that hearing this passage read in church felt like having someone dump garbage all over her. It didn't matter if she'd cleaned up and put on her Sunday best for church that morning, because after hearing these words she felt she like she couldn't get rid of the stink of her divorce.¹

Adding insult to injury, Christian preachers have used this morning's reading from Genesis as a “proof text” to condemn any family structure that strays from a heterosexual-normative definition of marriage – and the assigned roles of a man and a woman within that marriage.

Well, I'm here to tell you, it ain't necessarily so.

There's a whole lot to unpack, but the long and the short of it is that questions about marriage and divorce are seeming constants across time and cultures.

There was no single answer accepted within Judaism at the time of Jesus. That's part of why the Pharisees think they can trap Jesus with their question – even though they think they know the answer. They know what the Law allowed. They hearken back to Deuteronomy and say that Moses allowed a man to divorce his wife.

But their confidence skims over the ongoing debates about what grounds were sufficient for a man to do so. One school of thought was fairly strict, allowing a man to divorce his wife only if she were unfaithful. But others said a husband could write that certificate of dismissal if the wife displeased him in any number of ways.

Mark would have us believe that Jesus settled the debate once and for all, but he didn't. Not really. He didn't in his own time. And he hasn't for us in our time.

When Matthew repeats this story from Mark, Matthew says that Jesus says, “Whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery” (Matthew 19:9, emphasis added). What exactly “unchastity” means isn’t entirely clear, but it sure looks like Matthew is making an exception to Jesus’ absolute prohibition.

St. Paul goes further. In his first letter to the Church in Corinth, he repeats what he knows Jesus to have said, that a married couple should not divorce. But then he opens the door for a member of the church to separate from a non-believer. The phrase Paul uses is instructive:

I say – I and not the Lord ...

It’s clear that Paul knew what Jesus said about divorce and remarriage. And yet, confronted with a situation not anticipated before, Paul permits a Christian to divorce. Paul is utterly transparent. He admits that it is he who says this, not Jesus. He has no authority to do this. And yet, given the circumstances, Paul believes it is permitted because of God’s call for all to live in peace. This is a bold step, one he takes not *in spite* of his faith, but *because* of it.

People of faith have been struggling with these hard questions down through the ages. They were struggling before Jesus. And Jesus didn’t put an end to their disputes.

And we continue to discern our way in our own day. I’ll take my cue from Paul and tell you what I say – not necessarily Jesus – but what I say. (Though I’m not alone in this; it’s what our church says.)

The Episcopal Church allows for re-marriage of persons who have divorced. I was privileged to preside at a wedding between two previously-married people just this past Tuesday – to witness their vows and to bless the union that joined them – and their blended family – in holy matrimony.

Nobody, so far as I can tell, escapes from divorce unscathed. It’s hard. It’s painful for all concerned. It’s a kind of death. And yet we affirm that death never has the final word. We affirm that love opens up new possibilities for new life.



And the Episcopal Church, I hasten to add, celebrates marriage equality. I was a deputy to General Convention in 2012, when we finally authorized the blessing of same-sex unions. (I count it as a high privilege to have cast a vote to make that change.) And though I was not a deputy in 2015, I was thrilled to be a visitor to General Convention in Salt Lake City three years later when The Episcopal Church formally approved full marriage equality for all our siblings! It seems late in coming. But it came.

Following the lead of St. Paul and so many other people of faith before us, we continue to explore where the Spirit is leading us still. We have not arrived where we are today *in spite* of our inherited faith but *because* of that faith. That faith continues to invite us to dig deeper.

If we dig deeper into today's readings, there's more to see ... in particular we see an echo of Jesus' constant concern throughout the gospel for the vulnerable. The Pharisees, on this occasion, ask, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (It's not a 21st century question about divorce, but a 1st century question about patriarchy and male privilege.) In a culture that tended to treat women as little more than property, Jesus sees their worth and seeks to protect them.

And that concern for those most vulnerable is echoed again immediately in that moment when people bring children to Jesus and the disciples try to keep them at bay. This isn't a different story with a different point; it's the same story about how some – particularly men with power – prefer not to be bothered to care for those with nothing to offer them.

And the pairing of these two stories got me to thinking. This morning's gospel isn't just about marriage – and certainly not just about a husband and a wife. And it's not about nuclear families, but about the whole human family. Jesus teaches here – as he so consistently taught throughout the rest of the gospel – that nobody should be treated as less than human. Everyone should be drawn in and embraced, loved and protected, cared for and treasured; no one tossed aside and rejected.

Jesus reminds us, as we hear in the first chapter of Genesis, that God created all people – male and female – in the image of God. Writing women off and waiving children off both deny what is fundamentally true of everyone. (We were all created in God's image, none of us born with an asterisk.)

In that first chapter of Genesis, we hear one of the creation stories – each day of creation ending with God's assessment of what is being created. God saw what was made ... and God said:

It was good.

It was good.

It was good.

It was good.

It was good.

It was VERY good.

But in the second chapter of Genesis, as we heard this morning, there comes a moment when God looks at all that is and says that there was something about this good creation that was not good. "It is not good for the 'earth creature' to be alone ..." (It's not really a "man," *per se*, yet; it is a creature formed of the earth ... and there is none other like it anywhere in the world.)

And what follows is actually kind of funny. God forms “every animal of the field and every bird of the air” and presents them to the earth creature. It’s a trial and error attempt to figure out who will measure up as a fitting partner:

Here’s a camel. What do you think? *No, that’s not it.*

How about an alligator? *No!*

Here’s one ... an ostrich! *Don’t be ridiculous!*

I know, let’s go for a dog! *Pretty good, I admit, but no, not quite right.*

And then, finally, of course ...

[God] made the earth creature fall into a deep sleep, and while it slept, God divided the earth creature in two, then closed up the flesh from its side ... [and] fashioned the two halves into male and female, and presented them to one another.

Genesis 2:21-22 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

It’s only after God divides that first human creature into two, making two human beings – male and female – each from the same stuff as the other that the perfect helper is found:

This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh ...

In the cosmic ordering of Genesis, we are all made of the same stuff, one mother and father of us all. For all our differences, we need each other. God’s intention is a holy hope that none of us should ever have to face life alone. We have each other. We’re more alike than we generally admit.

Perhaps marriage is how some of us discover that sacred truth. But there is more than one way to order our families. And yet for all the different ways we love and marry and make a family at home, there is but one way to live together as members of God’s larger family. After all, Jesus was (so far as we know) never married. He invited others to join him, to walk together for mutual care and support, and so create a new family together.

It’s what we were all made for. We were created in God’s image, to accompany one another, to love and comfort and honor and keep one another in sickness and in health. And in so doing be faithful to our high calling as long as we all shall live.

ⁱ David Lose @ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/love-and-marriage>.