

Sermon: Pentecost 19

The Rev. Mike Wernick

October 4, 2015

Year B

Genesis 2:18-24

Psalm 8

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Mark 10:2-16

Today's readings can be hard to hear... especially for those of us who've been divorced... or re-married... it's another set of readings that can make a preacher wish she or he had the day off... but while there are many truths in scripture... eternal truths... independent of time or place or circumstance... most of the details in today's readings must be understood in context... the nugget is more than just divorce and adultery...

And while it can be easy for us to bring these passages forward into our time... into our context... while it may be easy to wonder how these passages apply to same-gender marriage... while it may be tempting to project this new reality back onto today's reading from Genesis... as easy as it would be to fall off a greased log in water... we have to remember that Jesus is being asked here... about one thing only...

He's responding to a question by the Pharisees about marriage and divorce... between a man and a woman... and we must remember that in testing him... they're doing so from an exclusively patriarchal perspective... but it is to this one thing only... that Jesus responds... their question... about whether it's lawful for a man to divorce his wife... is a set up... they or other Pharisees have asked other questions to try to catch Jesus off guard... breaking the law... so they can have something to use against him... like eating with defiled hands... like who's wife would the woman with seven husbands be in heaven...

Their question is consistent with these others... and conveys no concern about the woman... in fact... it diminishes her value as a person... fails to ask what will become of her after the divorce... and let's remember that for many of these women whose husbands divorced them... prostitution was one of the few remaining options...

Charles Campbell... Professor of Homiletics at Duke University Divinity School... wrote... Jesus' teachings and actions here are revolutionary... because at the heart of this text is the disruptive work of God in Christ... which overturns patriarchal marital relationships... and far from simply affirming and domesticating traditional notions of marriage... Jesus' words actually subvert his adversaries' patriarchal assumptions about marriage... the Pharisees question Jesus about whether it's lawful for a man to divorce his wife... is from a patriarchal framework within which only the man could seek a divorce...

Jesus' answer starts with the man who leaves his father and mother to become one in mind... body... and spirit his wife... but by the end... he also affirms the *woman's right* to divorce her husband as well...

And while in more recent years... there have been other comments made about protecting the sanctity of marriage... we have to remember that marriage has always been changing... that the church... and other faith systems... have continued to reinterpret marriage over the centuries... from Solomon's 700 concubines... to mail order brides who married for practical reasons... to Victorian notions whose women and men married for love... the church has brokered marriages to unite kingdoms... establish peace... and enlarge kings empires... while the church's coffers have grown... almost always with little concern about the woman as a person... and when some of those marriages ended and kingdoms were divided... there could be all out war... and even on a smaller scale... some of us know how about the feuds that can divide families... when there's a divorce... but not always... for the past twenty-three years... my former sister-in-law has remained an integral part of my brother's new family... all of whom attended her second marriage in June at which I was the officiant... there was even one Thanksgiving when... based on who was in town... and how many bedrooms and beds there were... these two women slept in the same bed because well... that just made sense...

Jesus' underlying concern is unity... an unbroken unity between people... and between people and God... and so we enter the marriage covenant expecting it to last... and not with a wait-and-see attitude... we make vows for richer or poorer... for better or worse... but on the other hand... we certainly wouldn't expect a battered woman to stay married to her abuser... but that's one way that marriage has changed... because at one point we would have expected her to stay...

And in my case... it would have been unjust to remain married to my wife... but before it became clear to us that there'd be a divorce... I went to great lengths to maintain the commitment I'd made to her and our daughter... one of the final things I did in 1997... was to attend Exodus International for almost a year... one of those Christian reparative therapy groups... you know... pray the gay away...

But I realized something that for me was a small consolation... even as I grieved the loss... the marriage vows we've inherited from hundreds of years ago... *until death do us part*... come from a time when human lifespans were much shorter... and people spent most of their waking hours doing what they had to just to survive... our modern reality of the work week... grocery stores... and leisure time... affords people opportunities for significant self-development and change... that's why it's so important that those who marry bring as mature a perspective as possible to the vows they make... and why we all need community to support us in our relationships...

Charles Campbell also writes: and Jesus elevates the children at the bottom of the social ladder into models for entering the kingdom... children... who are the least valued and most vulnerable members of society... are welcomed by Jesus... blessed by him and offered as models for receiving God's kingdom... he subverts both the cultural and legal presuppositions about women and children... and by doing so... highlights the sanctity of all relationships... whether it's marriage... or friendship... or those between parents and their children... what he's pointing to... what he's reminding us of... as the

Psalms does... is that everything is interconnected... relationships are sacred... and that there is unity in community...

Jesus' words and actions are revolutionary because contained within them... motivating them... is love... and this love is expressed within our baptismal covenant... love is apparently far less of an issue for the Pharisees... who don't ask... what's marriage about... how does it reflect God's presence... how does it embody God's forgiveness... how does it point to God's redemption... and how can we enhance it... support it... how can we take these two people... who begin like stones with jagged edges... and put them into the tumbler of life... throw in the grit of reality... and over time... as they tumble and bump up against their experiences and each other... know that they will smooth out... and become polished... and how can we know... really know when it is best for them to move apart... and how do we bear the couple's pain in that aftermath...

Some of you may know... that when Bp. Gene Robinson came out... and he and his wife Isabella divorced... they had a liturgy in church... a rite of passage... an un-marriage... to acknowledge their divorce and honor the years they had together... and to publicly remain committed to their children... because children are dependent on their parents...

And Jesus reminds us that one enters the kingdom... by this same kind of complete dependence on God... one does not enter the kingdom through the fulfillment of any abstract legal principles... including those related to divorce and remarriage... and in our time... as in Jesus'... there is still a critical need to address and correct all of the systems... from children's sweat shops... to equal pay for equal work... to a living minimum wage... all of the systems which continue to impinge on and oppress and subjugate children and women... anywhere... and for any reason...

Mike+