

10.07.18

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 10:2-16; Genesis 2

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We all love weddings, don't we? I mean, who couldn't love 'em, right? What with the beautiful bride and the handsome groom; the pomp and the circumstance; the joy and the celebration! But perhaps, best of all, the pledges and the vows. After all, here's a man and a woman, giving themselves to one another forever. It's one of the most wonderful things imaginable—two lives intertwining like that. *I, so-and-so, take you, such-and-such, to be my wedded fill-in-the-blank, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy will; and I pledge to you my faithfulness.* Tell me, who couldn't love weddings!

So, I'm not surprised if this morning's Gospel gets us shifting in our seats. In fact, I wonder if that's not the point, if that's not why Jesus' critics today bring up the touchy subject of divorce and remarriage in the first place. Maybe they're trying to make Jesus feel embarrassed, get His disciples a little nervous too. Mark reports that their motive in asking such a question about divorce and remarriage was to "test" Jesus. They want to make Him out to be some kind of radical, some sort of rabble-rouser who's out to disturb the peace and disrupt the civic order. And what better way to do that than to back Jesus into a corner with a hot debate about the morality of divorce!

Here's their challenge: "Y'know, Moses let a man send his wife away by writing out a certificate of divorce, so what do you think about that?" And that was true—Moses did. In Deuteronomy, Moses allowed for a man to divorce his wife (but interestingly, not a woman her husband) by just writing out a little note that stated she was no longer his wife. It didn't take much for a man to do so either—maybe a few burnt suppers, some incessant nagging, maybe being a real ball and chain about going out with the guys, that's all it took—and her husband could dismiss her just like that.

Now, think about existence in such a society. Obviously, in that system, women were extremely vulnerable to the whims of men. But as bad as it sounds so far, even worse off than women *with* men—believe it or not—were the women *without* men. It's hard enough today for single mothers, but back then women couldn't just go out and find a job and put their kids in daycare—that way of life hadn't even been invented yet. No, a divorced woman, especially if she never found another husband again, was left in a very precarious, unprotected, potentially life-threatening economic circumstance. That's what life looked like thanks to the flawed system Moses allowed for.

But notice how Jesus doesn't respond to their question about divorce and remarriage by *talking about divorce and remarriage*. It's classic Jesus—he doesn't answer their question directly. See, Jesus isn't interested in splitting hairs about permissible grounds for divorce or remarriage after divorce. Leave that to Moses and other legalists. After all, have such discussions ever really helped anyone? Instead, what Jesus is interested in is what God's interested in—marriage! He's not interested in division, detachment disunion—that's never the way of God. What Jesus wants to talk about is union, togetherness, communion. And funny how when you get back to what marriage is really about—what God set out to do for man and woman—all this other business about divorce and remarriage sort of falls into place, is brought into proper perspective.

So, that's what Jesus does. He takes us back to Genesis, and reminds everyone that from God's perspective divorce is never favorable—after all, He said that it was "*not good* that the man should be alone." Before Eve came along, Adam had no helper. And by the way, when the Bible talks about a helpmeet it is anything but derogatory toward women. Just the opposite! it shows just how special and important and *necessary* women really are. Another way of saying it is that Adam was incomplete—he had no one to complement him, make him well-rounded, smooth out his rough edges. And it would take nothing less than a woman to do the trick! So, here Adam was completed by Eve, just the right partner for him! And joined in marriage, they were in union, togetherness, perfect harmony.

But just like the rest of us sinners know firsthand, it doesn't take long before our own selfish attitudes put an end to the Honeymoon. After the man and the woman fall into sin, lickety-split their union breaks in half and their dance together falls horribly out of rhythm. All of a sudden, we find Adam pointing his finger at Eve, blaming her for what had

happened, so that what God had brought together man now put asunder. And Eve, well, in her curse she's told that a battle of the sexes is coming, men and women in competition, struggling against one another. We don't see that today, do we? Or . . . do we? Even her childbearing—that miraculous real-life one-flesh union that results from the two coming together—wouldn't go easy for Eve anymore. Instead, that would turn out to be not only one of the most wonderful experiences in a woman's life but also one of the most excruciating experiences she could ever go through.

But that wasn't the way it was supposed to go. Such division, such detachment, such disunion was never part of God's original blueprint. And that's Jesus' point here today. When His critics try to trip Him up by bringing up divorce and remarriage, Jesus chooses instead to talk about what's closest to God's heart. And that's union, togetherness, communion.

As a pastor, there've been a time or two when a couple comes to me, kinda like the critics come up to Jesus today. "Pastor, the government's made it possible for married couples like us to send each other away by filing for divorce—what do you say?" But before we start talking about all that, I pull a Jesus. In each case I say, "First off, I'm really glad you came to me with such a sensitive issue, and that you're inviting me into this fragile situation. But before we get too far, I need to be upfront about something. Jesus has entrusted me with His Word, and that's all I can say—nothing more and nothing less. So, based on what we hear from Him in the Gospels, I too am a little biased toward union. Y'know, trying to work it out, staying together, moving forward as a team. And the hope is, that after we have some meetings, going to Jesus in prayer and letting His Word heal our hearts, the two of you will grow closer together than ever before." See, it's not that I'm distant or insensitive as a pastor, it's just that I have faith in our God and His divine plan for marriage. And it just so happens that I also believe in miracles.

Now, to be sure, Jesus also mentions some rare cases when, perhaps after much effort at reconciliation, divorce can be inevitable—abuse and unfaithfulness are the two examples. Those are instances when perhaps the situation is just too dangerous to handle, or trust is so damaged it can seem beyond repair. In such cases, it's not so much the one filing for divorce who's breaking their vows, as it is the abusive or unfaithful spouse who's *already* broken theirs and therefore also the marriage bond. However, the question still remains—even if the spouse who's been wronged hasn't necessarily *broken* their vows, have they actually *kept* them by trying to making things work? Christians in all relationships seek reconciliation, so why not also in the most important relationship anyone could ever have?

I mean, imagine if that's how God worked in terms of our relationship. Picture what it would be like if He wasn't always pushing for unity, togetherness, communion with you and me. "Well, we gave it a good shot," He'd say. "But it's just one of those things. Sometimes differences are too difficult to reconcile." That's a scary thought, isn't it? That would mean there isn't a single one of us in this room who wouldn't receive a letter of divorce from our Lord! After all, who of us here today's always been enduringly faithful to God, not just through the good but also the bad? Any hands?

But that's not the way of our God. Here's how I know. Despite any unfaithfulness on our part, in the lovesick person of Jesus Christ, He comes in hot pursuit of us, seeking after you and me. You see, it was not good for Jesus, the new Adam, to be alone, so God caused a deep sleep to come over the Son of Man. It was while Jesus slept the sleep of death on the cross that God used the soldier's spear to open up His side. And out of Christ's side, flowing from His very heart, came not a rib but from the same place came the building blocks of His new bride—blood and water.

That water has poured into the font of your Baptism, creating you anew, like a beautiful, pure, virginal bride on her wedding day. And that blood is poured out on this altar—right here, today even—that you and He might no longer be two but literally made one flesh again. As we now celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb, He actually pours Himself into your heart, abiding in you so that you may abide in Him, making you one with Him—we call it Communion. Paul puts it this way in Ephesians: "Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word, so that He might present the Church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."

And it's interesting how our vows at Baptism sound a lot like wedding vows, don't they? Just listen to this:

Do you renounce the devil? . . . *Yes, I renounce him.*

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Do you renounce all his works? . . . *Yes, I renounce them.*

Do you renounce all his ways? . . . *Yes, I renounce them.*

It's like when we leave father and mother behind to be joined to our spouse, so do we forsake all to cleave to Christ.

Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth? . . . *Yes, I believe.*

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord? . . . *Yes, I believe.*

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? . . . *Yes, I believe.*

Then, it's God's turn. And pulling you close, holding your hands, looking into your eyes, He boldly declares in front of the whole congregation, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Like a woman taking the name of her husband, so do you take the name of our God at Baptism, becoming forever His, a member of His household. And guess what, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, He loves and cherishes you, in a bond that not even death can you do part. Just a few weeks ago, the Garcias for their fiftieth wedding anniversary were gracious enough to let us eavesdrop on the renewal of their marriage vows. Well, in just a few moments as you and Christ stand before this altar together again, think about how He renews His vows to you once more, making Himself one flesh with you, to have and to hold you as you have and hold Him.

Made in His image and likeness, unity, togetherness, communion are what we Christians are always about. And that's why marriage is called an icon, an image of Christ and His Bride the Church. When we die to self and live for our neighbor, seeking reconciliation in love, we become a work of sacred art. And not just in marriage, but in all our relationships, you and I can be living sculptures that show the world the kind of God we have. A God who never calls it quits, never gives up on us, but who loves us no matter what.