

THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proper 22

October 4, 2009

We hear in today's gospel that some Pharisees came to Jesus in order to put him to a test. And the question they ask is: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" It was a loaded question. For the Pharisees in Jesus' time were not of the same mind when it came to interpreting the rule concerning divorce found in the Book of Deuteronomy.

The more lenient interpreters might include things like bad cooking or not doing the laundry or, if there were tubes for toothpaste in those days, annoyance at the way one's wife squeezed the tube. All these could be grounds for divorce. No need for a lawyer. No settlement. Just a letter a man writes stating he has divorced his wife as he gives it to her and kicks her out of the house. The more strict interpreters would only allow infidelity as grounds for a divorce – that is on the part of the wife, not the husband. For a man could divorce his wife according to Jewish law, but a wife could not divorce her husband except with his permission. This is what The Book of Deuteronomy has to say in the twenty-fourth chapter, first verse: "Supposing a man has taken a wife and consummated the marriage; but she has not pleased him and he has found some impropriety of which to accuse her; so he has made out a writ of divorce for her and handed it to her and then dismissed her from his house."

Men had all the power. Women had none. Women who were divorced or set aside by their husbands had no property or other rights and were often among the weakest and most vulnerable in their society. They were like children. With this background, the question to test Jesus is indeed a very loaded question: "Rabbi, are you lenient or are you strict? What school of thought are you a part of?" Jesus doesn't play their game. Instead, he responds, as he so often does, with a question of his own: "What command did Moses give you?" And they reiterate Deuteronomy 24:1 as we heard. Jesus then goes on to frame the question in a completely different way than the Pharisees expected. He quotes Genesis, the beginning of creation. And presents the ideal of marriage as God intended it to be from the start: a mutual covenant – a loving, trusting, life-giving and faithful relationship. This is the kind of relationship God wants for all God's children.

The Pharisees, however, were caught up in the letter of the law. Their minds were focused on what they could or could not do and still remain faithful observant of the letter of the Law of Moses. They threw a hook out to Jesus, but he didn't bite! Instead, Jesus presents the ideal. And the ideal, then – as it is now – is that marriage is intended by God to be a permanent life-giving relationship between a husband and wife based upon mutual love, trust and faithfulness. Jesus is not in favor of divorce.

What happens, though, when the ideal doesn't become real? What happens when people find themselves in abusive and destructive relationships? What do people do in marriages which are so broken that any hope of reconciliation between a husband and wife seems to be an impossible task – even with marriage counseling or spiritual direction? Sometimes divorce is the only humane option.

Jesus presents the ideal of marriage to show what God intended from the beginning, knowing, at the same time, how far we humans fall short of making the ideal a reality in our lives. We need not dwell on the social context of Jesus' time to know the pain, struggle and heartbreak of a divorce. We see it all around us in our society, within our own families and within our own parish. I know that more than a few of you have been through an experience of divorce and I also know that it has led, though not always - but often, to new life you never thought could be possible.

The spiritual truth at the heart of Jesus' teaching on marriage is the mystery of God's love and how different it is than our ability or capacity to love. God's love does not have limits. Ours does. Whether we are married, divorced, remarried or single, we are loved by a God who does not stop loving us when we experience failure in our lives. God doesn't seek a separation from us when we drift away or neglect our relationship with God. God is faithful even when we're not – and as the scriptures tell us, "God's ways are not our ways" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

And as if to give further evidence to how God's ways are different than our way of thinking and acting, we have an instance of Jesus really getting angry at his disciples because they weren't very nice, to say the least, to parents bringing their little children to Jesus to have him touch them and bless them. Both this passage, as well as the one on divorce, are really teachings of Jesus about who God is, as Jesus reveals God to us – a God who loves us with an unconditional love, a love without limits. God's embrace is wide and open and accepting. And so, too, should it be for Jesus' disciples in mind, in heart and in action. But it just doesn't seem possible most of the time, because we fall short of that kind of love. Unlike God, there are limits to our love. We just can't seem to love as God loves us. But it doesn't mean that we don't at least try as a people called to live in the spirit of Jesus.

More than any person whose life has inspired my own in living the good news of God's unconditional love in Christ has been St. Francis of Assisi. We celebrate his feast today, October 4th, and observed it yesterday with the Blessing of Animals at a marvelous gathering of people and pets at our pumpkin patch. Francis' passion for the good news of God in Christ led him to love every person and creature in God's creation without exception, including his own father who disowned him because of the life he had chosen. He sang of the sun as his brother and the moon as his sister. He had a reverence for the earth he called mother and for every living creature God created, especially people barely able to be recognized as human beings – people struggling with leprosy, often rejected by family and community mostly because of fear and

ignorance. Francis saw the face of God in the brokenness of our humanity through the suffering Christ and reached out in a non-judgmental and loving way. His gentleness and non-anxious presence brought light, strength and peace to others.

You and I never know when we come to church on Sunday or go about our often busy lives throughout the week what's going on inside the people around us. It's so easy for us to make quick judgments about others when it comes to pointing out the weaknesses, the limitations, failures and mistakes of others. Some times I think some of us do this without thinking just to mask our own. But it's not primarily who we are called to be as followers of Jesus. And who we are called to be are instruments of peace, knowing and accepting our limitations and trusting God's unconditional love. For it's often on **account of**, and not in spite of, our inabilities, our limits and our failures, that the grace of God in Christ touches others through us.

Lord, make us instruments of your gentleness and peace in a world often filled with rough indifference.

Where there is hatred let us sow seeds of love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
And where there is sadness, joy.
Grant that we may not so much seek to be served as to serve.
To be understood as to understand.
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we experience the fullness of life.
Amen.

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