

Sunday, October 7, 2018
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 22 (Year B)
Genesis 2.18-24; Mark 10.2-16
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

In today's Gospel, Jesus comes out hitting pretty heavy on the subject of divorce. What he says may seem a little harsh from the perspective of 21st century Americans. After all, in our time, divorce is pretty common. If not divorced ourselves, we all certainly know someone who has been divorced—family, friends, co-workers. While statistics vary, it is commonly cited that 50 percent of marriages in America end in divorce. And some say the rate in California could be even higher. Thank you, Kardashians.

While Jesus' perspective may seem a bit extreme, we also recognize that marriage in ancient times was very different from our understanding of marriage today. In ancient—and not so ancient—times, marriage was not generally the romantic thing we recognize today. Not that, from time to time, marriage didn't occur between two people who loved each other. But quite often, marriages were contractual arrangements for economic and political gain. Usually gain for the husband, and not so much for the wife. Remember, particularly in Biblical times, women and children were property. Marrying a woman was the acquisition of an asset. An asset with the potential to produce lots of additional assets—children.

And similarly, divorce in ancient times was very different from our understanding of divorce today. Or rather, the mechanics were different. Under Jewish law, a man could divorce a woman for any reason—certainly for adultery, but also for such things as being unable to bear children, or burning the toast. Or, for that matter, just because. All he had to do was present her with a certificate of divorce and she was gone. No filing divorce papers, no lawyers, no court hearings, no division of communal property. A woman, on the other hand, did not have the option of divorcing her husband. Even if she could, she probably wouldn't, because to do so would leave her with nothing.

Over the centuries, some Christians were adamant about prohibiting divorce. To get around such strict views regarding divorce, some have used the loophole called annulment, which claims the marriage never actually existed. But in the last century or so, many Christians have come to accept the reality of divorce. That there are times when divorce is necessary and the better alternative to a couple staying married. In light of our evolving perspective as a society and as a church, our evolving view of the equality of women, we recognize that a literal interpretation of Jesus' words regarding divorce are not necessarily applicable today. But that does not diminish the truth of what Jesus was really saying—what he was saying on a deeper level. Because whether you have ever been married or not, divorced or not, Jesus has something to say to all of us in today's Gospel reading.

To understand that, we need to go back to the beginning. To marriage—you can't have divorce without first being married. And back to the beginning as in the very beginning. To our Old Testament reading from Genesis. That is what Jesus did in our Gospel reading. He really didn't want to get caught up in the Pharisee's arguments about interpretation of laws regarding

divorce. So Jesus shifts the conversation from divorce to marriage. While the Pharisees' main concerns are about the legality of divorce, Jesus looks beyond the law to what God intended for marriage as a part of the created order.

As we heard in the second chapter of Genesis, God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (Gen 2.18). Then he goes on to create woman from the rib of the man. To which the man replies, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2.23). Or in other words, "this one who has been created is my equal, my partner." And this led to the ideal of the bond of love, care, and mutuality we think of as marriage. Indeed, the end of our lesson reads "Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen 2.24)—the passage often cited as the institution of the sacrament of marriage. When viewed in the context of the entirety of today's passage from Genesis, it is clear that, as Lutheran pastor David Lose notes, "God intended marriage to be a union, a partnership, a supportive and mutually inter-dependent relationship" (David Lose, "In the Meantime" email, 10/2/18).

But there is still a key piece missing from this definition of marriage and of all relationships. A big piece. I am reminded of a conversation I had with a co-worker in my previous life. He was a devout Roman Catholic, attending church every Sunday, taking his children with him. But his wife did not attend church with him. She was Baptist, as I recall. She wanted to be able to worship with her family, but could not fully participate because she was a Protestant. She was even willing to convert to Roman Catholicism to be able to fully participate in church with her husband and her children. There was just one problem. She was divorced—my friend was her second marriage. The priest told her that she could convert, but first she would need to get an annulment. That she refused to do. By seeking an annulment, she would have been saying her first marriage never existed. And while she no longer wanted to be married to her first husband (obviously), she felt denying the marriage ever existed would be a lie. As she put it, that marriage was a part of who she was. Her first marriage had changed her and helped her become who she was now. To deny the marriage would be to deny a part of herself.

This illustrates for me that one of the biggest parts of marriage and of any relationship is transformation. As Pastor Rachael Keefe notes, "Marriage creates a union in which two people participate and are changed, a sacred relationship with mutual responsibility. One person cannot just set the other aside" (Rachael Keefe, *Christian Century*, "Living Word" for October 7, 2018).

Is not this the definition of Christian community? Is this not what we are about as Church? To bring together those who follow Jesus Christ in union with each other where we participate and are changed in a sacred relationship with mutual responsibility? The union of the first man and the first woman in Genesis is an archetype for God's vision for creation in which human beings are in relationship with God and each other. And through that relationship—with God and with each other—we are transformed.

So when Jesus talks against divorce, he is, in a broader sense, talking about the importance not just of marriage, but of all relationships we engage in. In referencing Genesis, Jesus is recognizing and lifting up that it is in the origins of human community beginning with this first

“marriage” that we see our mutual humanity, as well as the importance of intimate relationships as intertwined with all of creation. That when Jesus talks about adultery and divorce, he is raising the issue of faithfulness to one another. He is talking about striving to be faithful to one another in all relationships, and not dismissing one another, as a man could once simply dismiss his wife. Rather we are to honor and respect one another.

Today’s Gospel passage isn’t so much about marriage and divorce as much as it is about recognizing that we are all made in the image and likeness of God, as was the first man and the first woman. Made to be in relationship with God and with one another.

At the same time, Jesus recognizes the root of our difficulties in human relationships. That the law on divorce was written “because of your hardness of heart” (Mk 10.5). In the understanding of the ancients, the heart was the center of judgment, understanding, and the emotions. A hardened heart was one that was not in tune with God’s intention. And that while divorce is a possibility in a legal sense, he is pointing out the pain caused by the breaking of personal bonds between two people. The pain we feel and the pain God feels at our not living into his intention for us and for our relationships. Not just marriage, but all relationships.

This is what we strive to achieve in our relationships with one another in our parish community. To live into God’s intention for all humanity. This is our sacred story. We see this throughout Scripture. Scripture is about relationship. The relationship between God and his people. And the relationship between God’s people—between one another. And how God came among us in the form of his Son to model what true relationship is all about.

Today we begin our annual stewardship campaign. This year’s theme is “Transforming Generosity.” Over the next six weeks, we will hear from the members of our amazing stewardship committee how this place and its ministries have transformed their own sense of generosity in their stewardship of time, treasure, and talents. The common theme we will hear is how this community has been a place of transformation in their lives and in their faith journeys. But more importantly, we will hear how the relationships formed in this place have been profoundly transformational in their lives, helping them to live into the intention God has for all of us.

This place is already a crucible for forming transformative relationships. As some of you may recall, in my first six months as your Rector, I conducted a series of “Getting to Know You” Gatherings. We had six gatherings attended by about 43% of our regular members. During those meetings, I asked several questions of the attendees. One of the questions was “What do you particularly like about St. Gregory’s?” Sixty-five percent—nearly two-thirds—responded with a variation on the same theme. What people particularly like about St. Gregory’s is the sense of community, the feeling of family, having a connection to people, the friendly feel, or hospitality. Many indicated that it was this sense of hospitality and community that resulted in them returning after their first visit—and in them staying. And since that time, I have had a number of people—visitors, clergy colleagues, family members, and others—comment on how warm and welcoming this place is.

In his sermon at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, declared Christianity to be “a movement grounded in the unconditional love of God for the world and a movement mandating people to live that love, and in so doing to change not only their lives but the very life of the world itself.” (*Synthesis*, Proper 22, October 7, 2018). That our own lives may be changed, transformed, so that the world may be transformed.

That is what the transforming love of Jesus can and does do. That is what his Church is called to live into and embody. In this, we have a solid foundation here at St. Gregory’s. A place of hospitality and community that by its very nature facilitates the transformation we seek.