

Proper 22, Year B
October 4, 2009
St. Ann's, Old Lyme

May what is spoken here and what is heard be spoken and heard in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

To say the least, today's lessons from Holy Scripture make for interesting reading!

First, from Genesis, we hear about God establishing marriage as a norm. And then, in the Gospel lesson, from Mark, we hear about the indissoluble nature of marriage – that divorce may be, in some situations, a necessary evil, but an evil, nevertheless.

I once thought there could be nothing worse than having to preach on those lessons.

I was wrong. What was worse was being a college Chaplain (as I once was), and having to preach on these lessons on the occasion of Parents' Weekend. Which is exactly what happened one year when I was the Chaplain at Trinity College, in Hartford. So there I was, having to preach on lessons about marriage and divorce to a bunch of parents, many of whom I had never seen before.

And of course I had to presume that the assembled congregation was a microcosm of the world at large, and included, therefore, plenty of folks who had endured the agony of divorce.

So, ... what's a preacher to do?

What to do with these rather harsh-sounding lessons on the subject of marriage and divorce, especially in that particular context? Well, somehow I survived that ordeal. But, every three years, the same grouping of lessons comes around. And here they are today, staring us in the face.

Not surprisingly, I suppose, my first reaction to today's readings was: thank you, God, that this isn't Parents' Weekend. But my second reaction is that

these lessons really do sound harsh, in whatever context we hear them, whether that's a college chapel, or St. Ann's in Old Lyme, and whether we're married or single or divorced, whether we're male or female, and whether we're young or not so young.

The standards are laid out as both high and rigid. Marriage is the norm, and marriage lasts forever. Period. End of story. No exceptions. Right?

Well, actually, I don't think so. I think there's more going on here than meets the eye. For one thing, I believe there's a larger message than just about the institution of marriage. I believe, for example that what we heard from the creation story in Genesis, and what Jesus affirmed, is that human life and human relationships are sacred. They are of God.

And it was from the very beginning of creation, that God made us for one another – to be with each other and to care about each other. The Biblical account of creation has a certain pattern to it: God would do something, and then observe that it was very good. You know, on day so and so, God created one thing or another, and behold!, it was very good. It all went on in that vein for seven days, and behold!, it was all very good.

With one exception. The one thing in all that creation that God didn't think was good was that human beings should be alone. And that's when God gave humanity the gift of marriage. God has given us the ideal of marriage, so that we may know the joy of love, and so that we may find in our earthly lives some image of love that is enduring and unconditional. So marriage is the standard that God intends for us and hopes for us.

The problem is that the standard of marriage that we hear in scripture is often quite contrary to the experience of many people. And in the face of that tug of war between the ideal and the real, we tend – certainly in our culture – to do one of two things. Either we simply change the standard – lower the bar, if you will, or we try very hard to justify our deviation from the standard.

God, I believe, has a different idea. And I believe we hear hints of it in the reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. God sent Jesus Christ to live among us, in a form lower than the angels – as a human being. Jesus came to help us frail, fallen human beings – us - you and me.

Jesus came to help us, for whom the need is not a lowering of the ideal standard, nor easy justification when we fall short of the ideal. Instead, Jesus came to bring us forgiveness when we fall short, so that we can get on with our lives, freed from the baggage of guilt, and fully aware of how beloved we are.

That's God's hope and intention. That's why Jesus came, to offer forgiveness and reassure us of God's unending love. God has given us the ideal of marriage, so that we might encounter here on earth human love that mirrors God's love.

We don't always live up to the God-given ideal of perfect love and life-long marriage. We don't always live up to many God-given ideals. And it's not perfectly OK that we don't; the ideals don't go away. But whether or not we can sustain commitments does not impair God's power to sustain us.

In fact, Jesus Christ came into our world to reaffirm God's intention and power to sustain us through all our successes and all our failures, and to open for us the path to perfect love, the path to God.

Thanks be to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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