

20 Pentecost, Proper 22, Yr. B

October 7, 2018

Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 8, Mark 10:2-16

This morning, I'd like to consider the issues of marriage and divorce in the context of both the Genesis reading and the psalm. Someone has said that psalm 8 is written for stargazers. In that regard, I'm reading a book by a scientist, titled *Searching for Stars on an Island in Maine*. True to the title, he begins by talking about the fact that he and his wife spend their summers on a small island in Maine. One summer night, he was out in his boat. That night, he said, the sky was vibrating with stars. He decided to "take a chance", so he doused the running lights, turned off the motor, lay down in the boat and looked up. "A dark night sky seen from the ocean is a mystical experience," he writes. "The boat disappeared. My body disappeared. And I found myself falling into infinity. A feeling came over me...an overwhelming connection to the stars...I felt connected not only to the stars but to all of nature, and to the entire cosmos. I felt a merging with something far larger than myself, a grand and eternal unity, a hint of something absolute."

That must have been what the author of Psalm 8 felt when he asked, looking up into the sky, "what are humans (note about the generic Hebrew word here) that you should be mindful of them...you have made them little lower than the angels...you give him mastery over the works of your hands, you put all things under his feet..." Blessed as we are to live up here, I think many of us have had similar experiences and asked that same question: who and what are humans in God's grand scheme?

Genesis provides part of the answer. In today's reading, we see the early creation, in which God is indeed giving humans mastery over the rest of creation, naming every living thing. This human was created a little earlier in Genesis, created, you'll remember out of the dust of the earth, but filled, enlivened, with God's own breath. So, right from the beginning, we have part of the answer: humans are indeed a kind of in-between creature. Lower than the angels, but created to master, or to care for, God's good creation. In that sense, humans are meant, from the beginning, to be co-

creators with God, to work with God in his great plan for creation. Genesis lays out that plan, too. It's a plan for what the Hebrews would call SHALOM, translated not just as "peace" which we so often do, but rather as a state of being that includes peace, but is much broader – it's about well-being, flourishing, security, prosperity, unity, salvation. It's pictured in the Garden of Eden before the fall and then again in Isaiah when he paints a picture of the Peaceable Kingdom.

Hold that picture, which is what God intended from the beginning, up against a picture of our world today. One commentator I read last week said we're in the middle of another civil war, in which he says there are many wars going on right now: the war between the haves and the have nots, the war between urban dwellers and small town folks, the war between the globalists and the isolationists, to say nothing of the war between the genders which seems to be playing itself out in living color.

So, who are we? In-between creatures, longing for a return to Eden, longing for love and unity, and yet caught in all the other stuff that's human: stuff like the fear that closes us off, tempts us to greed and selfishness, but also stuff like our limited vision, which is also part of being human, and our fragility and vulnerability.

With all that as background, let's look at the question about marriage and divorce raised in this morning's scriptures. I think the first thing to note is that it doesn't appear to be a sincere question. The text clearly says that the Pharisees wanted to test Jesus with their question. Perhaps they want him to say something about divorce and remarriage that will get him into hot water, like John the Baptist, who got caught in a discussion of Herod's divorce and remarriage – that didn't end well, as you'll recall. Whatever, we should note that it's not a sincere question, not the kind of question someone who was struggling to do the right thing would be asking. I'm guessing in that kind of sincere, pastoral discussion, there would have been a different answer.

So, Jesus turns the question back to them, quoting from the Genesis passage we just heard. They know the answer to the question they just

asked, because the Mosaic Law did indeed allow divorce. Jesus goes further, however, and seems to be forbidding remarriage.

And here, I think, we need to remind ourselves about reading the Bible. It's not a do-it-yourself handbook, with directions and illustrations about how to lead a good life. It's a record of how people in the thousands of years over which it was written, struggled to understand who God was, and what God intended. So, when we come to read it, we need to be conscious of a couple of things. The first thing is that we need to remember that context, history, matter. So questions about what was said and what would have been understood at the time are crucial. So, in this situation, it's well to remember that this was a patriarchal society. Women and children were property; what mattered most was a man's prerogative and a man's honor. Jesus points to the law of Moses, but there were different interpretations of that law. One school of thought was that a man (and only a man could do this) could write a certificate of divorce if his wife had been "indecent." But another school was more lenient: a man could divorce a wife who had spoiled a dish of food, or talked with a strange man on the street, or spoken disrespectfully of the man's family in his hearing, or even if she wasn't as fair as someone else that he had found. Pretty open-ended and totally weighted in one direction. And, a woman who was so divorced had few options. For many women, that meant a choice between returning to her parents' home or living on the streets.

By pointing back to the Genesis passage, Jesus is telling them that the Mosaic exception exists because they couldn't live up to the idea that God intended. But I would note something else as well. This reading contains those additional sentences about welcoming the children. There was a similar passage earlier, when the disciples were arguing about who was greatest; there, too, Jesus pointed to a little child. Sometimes it's helpful, when reading a passage to note how it's placed, because that placement can shed additional light on the meaning of the passage in question. In this case, because this passage is between two stories about welcoming children, some commentators think that it's the vulnerability of children and their dependence that Jesus is pointing to. And saying that how the

powerful treat and take care of those who are vulnerable matters in God's Kingdom. In the case at hand, it's the women who are vulnerable.

So, how do we read this passage today?

And, here's another caution about reading the Bible. One needs to remember to separate what's timeless from what's time and culture bound. What's timeless here? I think, as always, it's the principle of love.

Marriage is ideally that school for love that Martin Luther talked about. But, quite simply, because we're human, it doesn't always work, in spite of our best efforts. That goes back to that ideal in Genesis again – the ideal that the marriage is allowing for all parties, husband, wife, children, to move toward shalom, towards that flourishing that allows them to be the fully alive persons that God has intended from the beginning. A word we often use for that is LOVE. And so in situations of marriage, divorce, and remarriage, I think the question always has to be WHAT'S THE MOST LOVING THING HERE, FOR ALL CONCERNED. And sometimes the answer is divorce.

The marriage service in the BCP talks about the intent and centrality of marriage and says, "therefore, marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently and deliberately..." But the church recognizes that that doesn't always work. Karl Rahner, a prominent RC theologian, put it this way:

"....we have no right to expect and require from every human couple that under no circumstances can it be separated. The calling and gift of God on which this indissolubility depends flows from (from mercy). It may be that God has not called this specific couple to marriage, that the divine basis and constitution are lacking from the very outset....In this case the partnership is radically dissolvable because there has been no real union in the judgment of God." (Ethics).

Another scholar says this: When it truly becomes impossible to sustain a marriage relationship, the obligation to do so is released, as when in the Middle Ages a broken leg made it impossible to continue on a pilgrimage to which one had committed oneself. (Sister Margaret Farley, *Just Love, a Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*.)

So, who are we humans? In-between creatures, meant to find our meaning and destiny in God, yearning for that new creation that will be God's Kingdom and yet creatures who struggle, and sometimes fail but then by the grace of God, get up and try again.

We've been given a life-time to get this right and grow into our deep human destiny.

Let me close with a poem that expresses that expresses who we are and who we are becoming:

If you could only see your beauty, for you are greater than the sun. Why are you withered and shriveled in this prison of dust? A basketful of bread sits on your hearth but you beg for crusts from door to door. You are more precious than both heaven and earth. You know not your own worth. See not yourself at a little price, being so precious in the eyes of God. (Rumi)

So, in-between yes, but being constantly held up by the breath of God, totally loved, always being drawn more deeply into the heart of God.
Amen.