

Proper 22, Year B
October 6, 2024

Here we are, sitting around the table in the Timm Room, sharing Bible passages that we find scary or confusing or troubling. For one of us it's Luke, chapter 14: you must hate your father and mother in order to truly follow me. I speak up (punishment for not looking ahead to the upcoming Gospel readings): for me, it's the one about divorce. O happy day. Did God mis-hear me and think that I said I have always wanted to preach on this? I look at the Old Testament for a safer place to land, only to find the King of Feminists passages in which it is firmly established that woman is subservient to man. I don't know whether to go out to the end of the tree branch which will surely break, and from which I will surely go crashing to the ground or just find the edge of an abyss to peer over. I ask you all for your indulgence as I try to walk through this.

We begin this morning's readings with our collect asking God to pour upon us the abundance of God's mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid – a lucky beginning for me attempting to walk through these troubled waters. From there we move to the second creation story, in which man is created before woman, gets to name all the creatures on earth, in the skies, in the ocean depths before falling asleep and unbeknownst to him, partners with God by sacrificing a rib to create the first woman. This, rather than being a thorn in the side for many feminists, could be seen as the only recorded instance of a person, other than a woman, giving birth. A sermon for another day. The Psalm which follows lists all the amazing things God has done and what, in the midst of all creation - sun, moon, stars, waters, heavens - makes us so important that the Holy Creator wants to companion with us? When I consider your heavens the work of your fingers, the moon and stars you have set in their courses, what are we that you should be mindful of us; you have made us but a little lower than the angels! Hebrews reminds us that God has spoken to his people through prophets, but now he speaks to us in the words of Jesus. This Jesus is the reflection of God's glory: *the exact image of God's very being*. And this Jesus, to whom we pray and

from whom we seek answers, says, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and if she divorces her husband, she commits adultery.” What do we do with this?

I am not searching for loopholes. I am, however as we all are, painfully aware of marriages which are clearly not “right.” One or the other or both are miserable, angry, seeking love and comfort from other sources, tempted into danger zones involving loss of sanity, health or even life. Just as we know of marriages after divorce where each is thriving, there is peace, love, and joy in their midst which in turn reaches out to all of those around them. Is it possible that the first marriage was not in fact ordained by God, in other words did God “join them together” or were they thrown together by circumstance, money, power, vanity, convenience, society/culture-driven, misunderstanding of the weight of it all? A bit like graduating from high school and assuming the next step has to be college because that’s “what’s done:” not necessarily. Boy meets boy, girl meets girl, girl meets boy, boy meets girl; they fall in love and the next step is “get married.” Not necessarily. Here’s a great place to insert marriage counselling - better known as pre-marital counselling, required if the couple plans a religious ceremony – by a priest, pastor, rabbi, imam, psychologist – an objective third party, preferably “tuned-in” to human behavior, and with good communication skills.

In addition to the question, “Was it in fact God that joined these two?” is our understanding that death voids the marriage vows. There are as many reasons for people to be together as there are people. Some of these reasons last for a lifetime, some become obsolete, in fact one might say that they die: physical attraction, sexual desire, passion, raising children, desire for companionship, common interests, differing but complimentary interests, sharing careers, need for protection, tax benefits, inheritance...In short, there are many reasons folks are drawn to one another and decide to marry, making a rather public statement that their love for each other is official. We take a huge risk when we vow to be together until death takes one of us away: we cannot know what the future may have in store: we dare not second-guess if it is God’s will that we stay together or go our separate ways.

When Jesus seems to answer the Pharisee's question about divorce with considerably less tolerance than the prophet Moses, could it be that Jesus is making his declaration concerning divorce and adultery based upon the existing law of the land? In other words, if you sign a contract drawn up by the legal authorities of this place and time and if you break this contract, those legal authorities are declaring that such and such are the consequences. "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" comes to mind: if you are going to be a part of this society, there are rules. Of course, the irony there is that Caesar has what Caesar has only because God gave it to him, so without God, Caesar has nothing.

Returning to divorce and adultery: God, pour upon me the abundance of your mercy as I confess that I cannot and will not stand here today and judge anyone's marriage whether it be forever or short-lived, knowing full well that you are not asking me to. There are plenty of authorities – religious and otherwise – who take it upon themselves to do just that. I will not be a part of that. The God that I know sent Jesus to show us how we should be: the little children that we are, Jesus takes up in his arms, lays his hands on us, and blesses us.