

“Greatest of These is Love”

Pr. 22 - 20th Sunday after Pentecost – 10/7/18 – Genesis 2 and Mark 10:2-16/B

I have officiated at two weddings in past two weeks and noticed a curious thing. Even the non-traditional couples who use very little of the wedding liturgy from the hymnal, still included the passage, *“What God has joined together, let no one separate.”* Which highlights the best part of the wedding service to me. Just as we do for the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, we take responsibility for oversight of this couple, or this child. We, the Gathered Community, promise to support, encourage, share the joys and sorrows, and to honor the bonds of this couple’s (or child’s) covenant with God. In other words, we, too, are responsible for what God has joined together! As church, we can’t disregard that we are called and gathered together by the Holy Spirit and become the Body of Christ, as well as his “bride.” Joining two together is a symbol for all the relationships we have with God.

But let’s start at the very beginning...in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Generations of families spent hours sitting around campfires after meals, passing along the stories of the day and the stories of their ancestors. Genesis – the word means beginning. And the oral stories of Creation helped ancient peoples make sense of their lives, to answer questions about why they did what they did.

Let’s revisit that story, *“In the beginning...”* First, God made Light, and then separated light from dark, and it was good! Goodness repeated each day – as stars and fish and trees were created, and it was good! It was all good. Then, in Chapter 2 we meet Adam. (His name is related to the Hebrew word *adamah*, which means ground, therefore, Adam is literally a “groundling.”)

And God said, *“It is **NOT** good that Adam should be alone, I will make him a helper....”* Now perhaps our modern ears would prefer a different word than helper, so let me suggest this reading, *“I will make someone suitable for him.”* Now, just so you know that God has a sense of humor, please consider the two verses before our reading that starts at verse 18. Verses 16-17 read, *“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it, you will certainly die.”* (Yikes!) And (then) God said, *“It is not good for the man to be alone.”*

But nothing already created was suitable for him. Nothing fit the Hebrew idiom “bone of my bone” which might be translated as, “this is perfect,” until God created this perfect companion for the first human relationship. And they became the happy result, fulfilling God’s good intention for us.

But now we must move to unhappy part, where Sin enters in, and what God intends as good, gets overtaken by human pride, and we make it about something completely different. Pride builds structures and rules that serve only ourselves. Not others, not God. For ancient people, it was always about God, the community, and the two people sharing their covenant vows on behalf of their families, who were coming together. It was about a covenant with God, and relationship between those families. But the rules developed, and the powerful found ways to use them...

Today, some Pharisees tested Jesus with this question, *“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”* Now, they KNEW it was lawful (they were Pharisees, who were the chief interpreters of the Law!) They were baiting him, as Jesus well knew. So Jesus said, *“What did Moses command you?”* And the Pharisees replied, *“Moses allowed a man a writ and divorce.”*

Now, if you look carefully, you’ll note that Jesus really says nothing about divorce. They asked, Is it lawful? not Is it pleasing to God? (Honestly, Jesus doesn’t even seem to care about the question of the Law.) He turns the test and proclaims the gift that has come straight from the

Kingdom of God. And perhaps hoping to touch their “heart Questions,” rather than the ones in their minds, I can imagine him offering this: “So, would you like to talk about your relationship with God?”

God’s gift was always about love: when you leave one relationship (your family) you are to cling to another, perhaps a suitable companion, as God’s gift. And then Jesus adds: “What GOD has joined together, let no **ONE** separate...” We are responsible for one another.

The Church uses Marriage Symbolism when it calls us the “Bride” of Christ

But, these Pharisees seem interested to find out only if Jesus was “on their side.” Their Point was to point fingers: to exclude, to assert power over each other, over women, over children... Ever noticed how rigid we are on issues don’t affect us personally? Yet, God has always known that relationships are hard work, especially for prideful humans centered first on themselves... So, whether we are forming a marriage or a community, the continuing softening of hearts towards each other over time is one of God's greatest gifts.

Perhaps that is why this passage is paired with story about Jesus welcoming and blessing little children, even as the disciples are objecting and trying to keep them away. For whose heart is not softened in presence of the little ones? Those with no power, no rights, no demands, no status? Remember that the most vulnerable are the ones for whom God did his best work on the cross.

In closing, let me share a little story. I had finished a premarital session, and the couple and I were leaving the church when we ran into a bride, wedding dress and all, coming into meet her husband and renew their vows. They had been married for quite a while, so I asked if she had any advice for the new couple? Almost without hesitation she shared this, “*Chose to be married every day.*” You know, I thought that was pretty good off the cuff advice, but unfortunately a few years later, the experienced couple divorced. Sometimes, it seems, we depend too much on our choices, on our wants, and forget that friendships, companionship, all our relationships are gifts from God; and need loving nurture more than preference.

“Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.” Now, if you’ve been sitting here waiting for an answer to the Question of divorce – and admit it, you were not thinking is divorce lawful, but sinful – here’s the bottom line. Is divorce a sin? Yes, it is. Divorce was never God’s intent for relationship. But, does God forgive sinners? Absolutely. Day after day after day. Love and forgiveness are God’s gifts to you. And the greatest of these is love. Amen

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Resources: Sermon Brainwave; A.Katherine Grieb; Rachael Keefe, for The Christian Century.