

Pastoral Message: October 3, 2021

I have an opportunity each week to have Bible study on Mondays with a group of parishioners that really, by listening to their experiences, help my preaching. We discussed how challenging these readings are to preach on this weekend. The readings point out not only the gift of marriage but also bring up for people the painful reality of divorce. Most of us have been touched by divorce in our lives in some way, either our families or our friends. I think it is important to remember while the readings affirm marriage that our God is compassionate toward those who know the reality of divorce. I would suggest the readings call us to go deeper, to dive beyond the surface.

The reading from Genesis reminds us that human relationships are a mystery. The story is not meant to be taken literally but shows our desire to understand our origin, and this is sometimes reflected through poetry, story, and myth. This story is meant to convey a larger point. Carl Jung once said that the death of story (myth) leads to the birth of fundamentalism. This story was a in a sense a rebellious hymn; the Jews saw things differently than other narratives we see at the time. For example, the Babylonians believed that creation was a result of gods fighting within the sky and that through violence creation came about. The Jews show this radical idea that God does not create through violence but through God's word God spoke creation into being; it is an act of love. We see that, when God created human beings, God breathed the very life of God into creation. I often tell people that God is as close to us as the breath we breathe. This breath is truly the presence of life or the presence of God within us. I would suggest that, starting with the first reading, the readings today call us to humility. Humility comes from the word humus which reminds us that we are of the earth. Perhaps the best definition of humility is having our feet firmly grounded, understanding that our humanity is a gift and we recognize that everything is a gift. Humility also is accepting our human limitations, and maybe the greatest journey of love is to come to self acceptance. It is this that allows us to love others. The reading points out the gift of relationships, that we are called to live in relationship with one another. We are all made of the same stuff, and perhaps violence and hate in the world is because we cannot see our deep interconnections.

The reading from Hebrews shows us the humility of God, that God chose to become human and Jesus truly became our brother who understands deeply both the joys and sorrows of the mystery of being human. We hear that Jesus knows the reality of death and heartbreak and that he loves us as a brother through it. The goal of Christianity, as we grow more deeply in our relationship with our brother, Jesus, is that we begin to see others as not apart from us but truly as our brothers and sisters. We could go further, as St Francis of Assisi taught, to see all of creation in a relational way. Francis understood when he would call brother Sun and sister moon that it is all a part of us. The beauty of creation is really, in a sense, God's first revelation to us of God's love.

In today's Gospel I would suggest that both the pharisees and the disciples are tending to take themselves too seriously. My friend and mentor, Father Larry Cann, who had such a great sense of humor and went to the Lord at age 90, used to emphasize that one of his philosophies in life was to take everything seriously but yourself. I believe this keeps us humble. One of the dangers of religion is that we can become too rigid or use it to place burdens on others. Perhaps Jesus places a child in front of us to keep us grounded. This is one of the great gifts of children. When we spend time with them we become more lighthearted. Their dreams and imaginations truly help us to get a better vision of the Kingdom of God.

We need to understand the context of this gospel. Jesus is actually standing up for the vulnerable. This was a patriarchal culture and, sadly, in Jesus' day women were not often viewed as equals. But Jesus emphasizes their equality. The reality of divorce in Jesus' day could leave the women very vulnerable. In the story, they seem to want to place blame on the women but not the men. But Jesus sees them equally responsible. I would suggest this reading challenges our church to look at ways, in leadership and at the level of decision-making, that God sees women as equals and even today our structures, certainly our church and society, need to change to see the gifts of women. I would also suggest that marriage over the centuries has evolved and changed and that the important thing is that it

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is a way of living out discipleship and following Jesus. There have always been reasons why divorce might be necessary. I once heard a priest say that he never met anyone thinking about divorce on their wedding day. The gospels show though a Jesus who meets us in love and compassion when this reality happens. I think this is a challenge for us as a community, to both affirm and try to help encourage marriages, and also, if the reality of divorce happens, that it is a time that as a community we are called to support people with compassion and love. I love the line from Pope Francis that the Eucharist we celebrate is not cookies for saints but medicine for sick people.