

“God’s Dream”

One of my favorite ministries as a priest is preparing couples for marriage. A lot of ministers do not like doing it. Some have told me as much, and others by the perfunctory way they go about working with couples clearly do not see it as the rich ministry it is. I enjoy it for a number of reasons, not the least of which is getting to know two people well and getting to understand their relationship. When the process goes well there is a level of intimacy that is not often revealed in our relationships even with those we are close to. I learn how the couple met, what attracted them to each other, how the relationship has developed, how they argue and make up, and what are their hopes and dreams.

Each couple has its own nuances. The first couple I married both worked as physical therapists. They loved hiking the mountains around Charlottesville. Their love blossomed on long hikes. Thus the wedding was held in a meadow on hillside. My most recent couple both work in healthcare. He is a doctor and she is a nurse. Their love blossomed in undergrad, but it was forged in the years of medical training and in dealing with the serious illness of the bride’s mother. Their dream was to be married in church. What a privilege it has been to get to know these couples over the years and preside at their weddings.

When we hear the passage from Genesis these couples seem to be fulfilling the dreams of God. They are becoming through marriage “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” Their binding together in marriage is another step on the journey where they continue growing closer and more deeply connected. It is like they are becoming one on a cellular level, much as the first two human beings were one. This is wonderful and poignant imagery, which can become a reality. I think on their wedding day, most, if not all, couples have this ideal in mind. It may not be a conscious thought but it is there. It is God’s ideal also.

Sadly, not all marriages live up to God’s ideal. For many reasons couples who once vowed and truly believed that they would be married until parted by death, start to realize that their ideal is not being realized. Sometimes the reasons are simple, but most times they are complex. Whatever the reasons there is a realization that a dream is unfilled and dying or dead. There are many emotions involved, but certainly one that is most profound is sadness. When a marriage ends and love dies there is deep loss and grief. No matter what emotions present to the outside world, internally people grieve the loss of something dear.

When the Pharisees approach Jesus with the questions about divorce they are not thinking about the loss, grief and sadness. They are being legalistic and heartless. They are not thinking about couples and their dreams, children divided between parents, damage to friendships and communities, and the other losses that divorce brings. They are merely trying to pose a question to Jesus that will put him in a bind and take him down. They are not concerned about the depth of loss, just getting the better of Jesus in a theological argument. It is a cold and cynical move.

However, Jesus cannot take the people, children, hurts and damage out of the question. In fact, he can only respond from that position. He cannot respond from the law but must respond from the ideal and the dream of God. Otherwise he is not being true to the deep meaning of the Torah—the foundational teaching of Judaism. Not

only that, but Jesus sees through their thinly veiled attempt to use the dream of God as a way to confound him and discredit him as a teacher and spiritual leader to so many.

Jesus then quotes to them a passage from Genesis, the first book of the Torah, saying; “Because of your hardness of heart” Moses gave you permission to divorce your wife. Moses varied from God’s ideal not because divorce was a good thing, but because some men are so hard of heart that divorce is permitted (notice that it was only a husband who could write a certificate of divorce). Then Jesus reminds them of the dream of God again quoting Genesis and saying, “But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’” That is what God envisioned from the beginning when the two human beings were created. The result is that, “they are no longer two, but one flesh.”

Then Jesus adds his own admonition that we are accustomed to hearing in wedding services, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”¹ Jesus tells us unequivocally that marriage is not to be entered into lightly. It is a holy covenant. What’s more it is not just between two people but two people and God. There are three involved and the marriage is sacred.

As we have discussed in recent weeks, Jesus often speaks in hyperbole, because it gets our attention. In this case he pushes back on the Pharisees’ literal reading of scripture with one that is more human and humane. He tells us that divorcing our spouse leads to relationships afterward being adulterous. Once again he is using hyperbole to get our attention. I daresay that Jesus does not want anyone to continue in a loveless and lonely marriage. Jesus does not want anyone to continue in a relationship that is physically, emotionally, or mentally abusive. These relationships are not the dream of God as stated in Genesis. Relationships like these are not a mutual joining together in love. These types of relationships are not condoned by God. God does not want any of us to endure abuse, emptiness, or pain for an ideal that is not being fulfilled.

Too many people have been damaged over the centuries by the legalistic reading of this text. When what Jesus was doing was fighting back against legalism. The hardhearted legalism of the Pharisees was replaced by the hardhearted legalism of the Church. Leave it to us humans to get Jesus so completely wrong that we replace one mistake with another.

Marital relationships as envisaged by God and supported by Jesus are supposed to be beautiful, nurturing, and a symbol of God’s love for humanity. Ones that are so callously entered into that divorce is used as a quick solution to problems is not the ideal. Neither are marriages full of loneliness and pain. The ideal may be hard to attain, but anyone who has been married knows that it is work. It is not meant for everyone. It is also something so important that we should support those who have entered into it.

Thank God and Jesus for making marriage a sacred covenant that gives life and love to those who enter into it mindfully and faithfully.

¹ Mark 10:9 KJV