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What we have learned from Charles Darwin and the anthropologists who seem pretty certain that human beings first emerged in Africa — or maybe Greece or Bulgaria — does not nullify what Genesis has to teach us about the meaning of creation and human life. The ancestors from whom we have inherited the mythological tales of Adam and Eve had no interest in scientific evolution or the missing link. They passed on the stories to share their understanding that God created in order to share life, as St. John would later say, life in all its abundance.

When asked about divorce, Jesus cited the Genesis creation stories to explain that, as symbolized in the relationship of marriage, human beings were created for one another. Jesus talked about Eve and Adam in reply to some Pharisees whom he described as people suffering from a noxious case of cardiosclerosis — popularly known as hardness of heart. They were prodding him to make a pronouncement about how a man could legally get rid of a wife he had ceased to find sufficiently attractive or useful. The teachers of the day held opinions that ran the gamut; some allowed a man to divorce his wife only in the case of infidelity while others gave him the go-ahead if she cooked poorly or ceased to please him.

But like everyone else who challenged Jesus to a debate, those poor guys had not done enough homework to know what they were getting themselves in for. First, although some of their ilk enjoyed criticizing Jesus' background, they may not have considered the implications of bringing this question up to a teacher whose father had considered divorce when his mother was pregnant with him. Those hapless enquirers unexpectedly got off to a very bad start.

In reply, Jesus took their shared family history back to the very beginnings, to God's original plan in the creation of humanity. He quoted the two different stories in which Genesis described human origins, highlighting a central point of each of them. When Jesus quoted "God made them male and female," everyone who knew their Bible verses would have finished the sentence, "in the divine image." Genesis 1 clearly states that human beings, male and female, are made in the image of God. Jesus then recited the statement from Genesis 2 about the man leaving father and mother to cling to his wife. That statement recalled the whole story in which God declared that humans were not made to be alone; they belong to one another.

The upshot of Jesus' teaching went far beyond the question the Pharisees posed. Jesus' statement that a divorced and remarried man was committing adultery against his spurned wife sounded absurd to people in a society in which the woman was effectively little more than property to be handed from father to husband. The ideas Jesus proposed about fidelity and equality were so far beyond their religious and cultural imaginations that Matthew who could quote Jesus as saying that people should pluck out an eye if it caused them to sin, tamed this saying by giving an exception and simply avoided the question of equality.

In case the reader did not understand what Jesus was getting at, immediately after the discussion of divorce, Mark recorded the incident in which the disciples incited Jesus' ire by trying to keep little children from coming to him. Those disciples, hyper-aware that anything that seemed to lessen Jesus' dignity reflected on them, must have been doubly

mortified by Jesus' reaction. Jesus deflated their petty pretensions by holding, blessing and praising the needy children and then claiming that they were the example to follow.

Mark does not give us the collection of sayings that Matthew presented in the Sermon on the Mount. Nevertheless, in this and other instances he presents Jesus as the master teacher of the true meaning of the law. When his examiners brought up the question of divorce, Jesus turned it into a discussion of the dignity of each person and the fact that human beings are made for loving one another as truly as we are made to love God.

Today the same situation continues to play out with a host of contemporary characters. The Gospel insists that no one, not a displeasing spouse, not a helpless child, not an immigrant, not even a criminal, is dispensable.

GENESIS 2:18-24

The second creation narrative in Genesis is as warm and human and earthy as the first is majestic. According to this account, God fashioned the first human creature from the clay (adama) of earth and then, for the first time ever, God saw something that was not good: "It is not good for the human to be alone." So, our folksy storyteller reports that God made all kinds of creatures out of the same material that the human had been made from. God brought each to the fellow and he named them all.

While the details of the creating are fanciful, the truth of the story comes out in this fact: surrounded by all those birds and wild animals, pets and cattle, the fellow still felt very alone. So, God put the human into a trance and created an Other ["other"], not from the earth and thus similar to him, but from his very own flesh, and therefore somehow both identical to and different from himself, someone by whom he could be called a man because she was called a woman. The story of the first parents reflects what happens through the birth and growth of every human being: We receive our life and identity with and from others.

The images of this story tell us that although the original human could give a name to all those creatures and things, none of them could respond in kind. But when God presented the two humans to one another they recognized each other as "suitable partners." Adam met who could name him as clearly as he could name her. Together they could make meaning of their world. In his book *Genesis Scripture* scholar David Cotter compares the first encounter between Adam and Eve to that between any two people who discover a kinship with one another so intense that "one feels as though a hitherto ... unknown part of oneself is being discovered" and they "share, in some mysterious fashion, a single personhood."

Although the selection of this reading as a complement to today's Gospel underlines its implications for marriage, it reflects more broadly on the social nature of human beings, indicating that we are made for one another, that we are made for communion. In that, every relationship of love points to our ultimate destiny of union with all in God.

PSALMS 128:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

Today we sing the whole of this psalm, a family blessing which contemplates the joy of three generations. Our refrain is worthy of serious meditation as a communal prayer. As we ask God to bless us we might remember the profound sense of solidarity that the Jews of Jesus' time felt in their prayer. For them, to pray with someone implied that those praying were intimately united in their relationship with God. The reason they could not eat with nonbelievers was that they could not give thanks together for God's blessings on Israel. Every prayer addressed to the God of Israel recognized and reinforced the understanding that the people's relationship to God was as communal as it was personal. Thus, when we pray "May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives," we are committing ourselves to the well-being and holiness of each and every member of the community. The act of praying becomes an act of communion, and this refrain makes that explicit.

The opening line of the psalm reminds us that awareness of God's grandeur is a grace. It invites us to wonder at every bit of life, from the changing leaves to the harvest, the birds and all of God's creatures. From there, the psalm goes on to celebrate the joy of our vocation as co-creators with God and the blessings of family life. All of that brings us back to the communal refrain, "May the Lord bless us."

HEBREWS 2:9-11

From now until the Solemnity of Christ the King we will be hearing from the Letter to the Hebrews which is less a letter

than a proclamation composed by an author who writes like a pastor. In Chapter 13, the author describes it as a brief word of exhortation.

Today's short selection connects with Jesus' assurance that the kingdom of God belongs to the lowly. This passage describes Jesus himself as the example of lowliness because he assumed a state "lower than the angels." This last phrase comes from Psalm 8 and, although in context it refers to human exaltation, here it expresses Jesus' lowliness in experiential solidarity with all of humanity.

When the reading says that Jesus was "made perfect" through suffering, it is not referring to the sort of unchangeable completion one might think of from Greek philosophy. In the text *Hebrews-James* by Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church, perfection in the scriptural sense means being fit for the task one is given; far from referring to someone being unchanging, it would be better described as being adaptable to everything. Therefore, suffering perfected Jesus for unlimited solidarity with human beings. It allowed him to experience and to reveal the complete dependence on God that expresses the fullness of the human vocation.

MARK 10:2-16

Today's Gospel is not as simple as it may appear and even in its day it was controversial. On the surface it seems that when the Pharisees tested Jesus on the question of divorce, he responded with a teaching so radical that Matthew would modify before using it in the Sermon on the Mount. Immediately after this discussion, Jesus angrily reprimands the disciples who get in the way of his holding and blessing little children. Underneath the two incidents we can discern Jesus' teaching about what it means to be human and how one can participate in the kingdom of God.

The Pharisees who approached Jesus with their question were playing a part in the ongoing antagonism between Jesus and religious leaders. In those days the legitimacy of divorce was not an issue; debate on the question centered on the motives for which a man could be rid of his wife. When Jesus asked about Moses' "command," he knew full well that there was no commandment against divorce. The careful Pharisees replied that Moses "permitted" divorce. That gave Jesus the opportunity to revisit the purpose of the Law as a guide, not the recipe for fulfilling the God-given vocation to be human.

In a sentence that could have inspired Paul's entire approach to the Law, Jesus said that Moses conceded the possibility of divorce because of "the hardness of your hearts." Like a Band-Aid on an infected scratch, it wasn't a solution, but it stopped worse things from happening. Jesus gave them that background as a preparation to recall what God's design had been from the beginning.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus their question about legality, he pointed them to the Law, their favored resource for adjudicating behavior. He then expressed his own opinion grounded in what God had revealed through the process of Creation. As he reminded them of the beginnings, Jesus referred to the two divergent stories of creation. First, he said that God had created "male and female," a reminder of the first chapter of Genesis which states that God created humanity in the divine image. Jesus' clear implication, something that Genesis 2 spells out more clearly, is that human beings are social. No one is complete in her or himself alone. We are called forth through relationships with one another and those relationships continue to form us in the divine image.

Jesus then referred to the creation account of Genesis 2, saying that as the man and woman were made for each other and that the partnership of marriage takes precedence over every other human relationship, including those of blood and family of origin. Although Jesus had already radicalized this teaching by calling his disciples to make their relationship to him and their community the primary relationship of their lives, he never called spouses to leave one another; relatedly, 1 Corinthians 9:5 indicates that the wives of Peter and other disciples participated in their mission travels.

In his interchange with the Pharisees, Jesus went far beyond the question of divorce to teach about the meaning of human relationships in general. He was telling the Pharisees that their question — and by extension any other question of righteousness or justice — could not be answered by fixed law which applies to particular circumstances. (The law they cited — Deuteronomy 24:1-4 — referred specifically to the fact that a man could not make a new claim on a wife that he had divorced after she married another.)

Jesus consistently looked beyond the arena of legality. He called people to discern God's will as that which promotes life-

giving relationships in each and every situation. He applied his criteria to the marriage question saying that it was not humanity's prerogative to override God's intention in creation. When he spoke privately with his disciples about the topic, he reinterpreted the legal explanations of the day by treating men and women as equals before the law: a remarried man committed adultery against his wife as much as she against him if she remarried. Mark doesn't describe how the disciples reacted to that culturally outrageous assertion, but the fact that Matthew conditioned it (5:32, 19:9) demonstrates that even the earliest Christians found it difficult to accept at face value.

Underneath Jesus' reflection on marriage lies the question of all human relations. That is a clue about why Mark followed the divorce question with the incident of Jesus and the children. Like the Pharisees who debated what could be done with troublesome women, the disciples didn't want children bothering the Master. (Of course, the disciples' own prestige was at stake when Jesus hung out with "unimportant" or "disreputable" people.) When Jesus saw them disparaging the children, he reproached them angrily, not just for demeaning the children, but for missing the entire point of his teaching about the kingdom of God. Like the Pharisees who debated the right to divorce, the disciples' treatment of the children demonstrated their willingness to make distinctions between important people like themselves and those who could be summarily dismissed.

Jesus would have none of it. Human beings were made in the image of God and an offense against one of the least is equal to an offense against whoever is considered greatest. Jesus' reception of the children reminds us that as adults, one of the hardest lessons we have to learn is how to receive love, the love of God or divine love expressed through human beings. We would like to earn it, to deserve it, to be self-sufficient, publicly admired awardees of divine consideration, but that is not the way the kingdom of God works. The kingdom of God belongs to those who can receive it as undeservedly and as happily as children who simply accept the tender nurture that helps them grow into all they can be.

Genesis tells us that human beings were created to be recipients and images of God's ongoing, free loving. Jesus lived to show us how to give that love and in his dying he learned the extreme of how to receive it in unconditional dependence on God.

Planning: 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

If the preacher decided to focus only on the second reading today, he might avoid the topic of marriage, but the assembly is sure to be thinking about marriage after hearing the other two readings and the psalm. Some might even find a reference to marriage in the second reading's words about becoming "perfect through suffering."

In an age when many feel that marriage is under attack (and many young people no longer embrace marriage though they live as couples), it can be tempting to focus the liturgy this week on issues like pre-marital sex, divorce and gay marriage. That is not likely to be a very fruitful effort, however. It may be more successful to lift up marriage and encourage people to see the positive rather than the negative. An old adage says you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar!

Our first reading presents marriage as a remedy for loneliness, but it also reminds us that true marriage forms an intimate union that is unbreakable. The two become one flesh. This might be a good day to lift up examples from among couples in the parish who have shared one life for many years. Perhaps, one or two such couples could offer a short witness talk at announcement time (or even within the homily).

In the Gospel, Jesus does reject divorce rather strongly, but the real point is that those who marry should be united so deeply that divorce becomes unthinkable. That does not mean we cannot talk about divorce, but in doing so, we must recognize that some marriages are not tenable (e.g. when domestic abuse is rampant) and that many of those who are divorced became so through no real fault of their own.

The call to permanence in marriage is important but it needs to be tempered with recognition that not all who are divorced were at fault. Pray for those who are in difficult marriages and those who have experienced divorce but do not condemn.

This would be a great Sunday to recognize any parishioners who have celebrated silver or golden anniversaries this year. Many dioceses have such a celebration each year, but the parish should also encourage all married couples to aim for such stability. The Book of Blessings offers several options that could be adapted for this weekend. The blessing prayer at #111 can be used for all married couples with a simple modification in the second sentence to read: “Look with favor on (those) whom you have united in marriage.”

In the petitions today, pray for lasting marriages, but also pray for troubled marriages, for those who have experienced the pain of divorce, for those preparing for marriage, etc.

Prayers: 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

The readings this Sunday call us to a renewed understanding of the complementarity of married love. God created man and woman as partners and equals who, at their best, will live faithfully all their days. In marriage, couples bear witness to God’s command to love one another and to form community.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you are the source of all love: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you came to live among us: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call all people to love one another: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for the needs of this gathered community and for our world.

Minister For the church, for all of us, for steadfast effort to build up the community of faith with love and compassion, in good times and in bad times, in joy and in sorrow, we pray:

- For our country and our leaders; for journalists who tell the stories and for public servants who seek the common good; for resolve in the face of all odds to do what is right, we pray:
- In thanksgiving for couples whose married love is both generous and equal; for grace to continue to choose each day to honor their promises made; for joy in the gift of intimacy and companionship, we pray:
- In this month set aside for respect of all life, for commitment among us to protect the unborn, to welcome the immigrant, to accompany the prisoner, to feed the hungry, to educate the needy, we pray:
- For those who experience the pain of divorce, and who grieve the loss of hopes and dreams, for courage and for consolation, we pray:
- For all our beloved sick, for those who face addiction or depression each day, for those who live with dementia or mental illness, and for families and caregivers who love them, we pray:

Presider Loving God, we who were created in love and created for love, often disappoint even ourselves in our failures to be the people you intended. Hear our prayers this day and renew us once again in our efforts to be the families you call us to be — committed to one another and generous in our time and talent. We ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son. Amen.

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