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Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As I mentioned in introducing the Gospel, we continue to listen to Mark's description of this final journey of Jesus with his disciples to Jerusalem where he is to suffer and be put to death, and along the way Jesus is instructing them about discipleship -- how to be his disciples. He's asking for some radical change in their thinking and in their way of acting and so if we listen carefully to what he is teaching us, we too, if we wish to be his disciples, will discover that we need to change, perhaps even radically, in our thinking and in the way we act.

In the Gospel, the Pharisees pose a question to Jesus, as we just heard, and in a way I guess it seems like a very ordinary type of question although Mark says they were trying to test Jesus, trying to catch him. But as we listen to the exchange between Jesus and those Pharisees, we have to remind ourselves of the context from within which that question came and then how Jesus changes the context. See, they were living in a very patriarchal society. In fact, it was so patriarchal, that is male-dominated, that women were treated like property and a man could dismiss his wife for almost any reason whatsoever, practically no reason. In fact by the time Mark was writing this Gospel and the Christian community was living more clearly within the Roman Empire, they were living within a legal system that said women had no rights whatsoever -- none -- they could even be killed by a husband and it would not be a crime and so that's the background within which this question comes forward.

But Jesus changes all of that, that context, by going back to this original myth -- and a myth is *not* something that's not true. A myth is a story and many of the stories in the Bible are simply that -- they're stories. They're myths, but a myth is a kind of a story that has a very profound truth within it and so this

myth of creation is one that Jesus brings forward when he wants to answer their question and when you listen to that myth there are two very profound and important truths that should shape our thinking.

First of all, that myth tells us that from the very beginning, and it's forever, men and women are totally equal. That's what is coming through in this story. God has Adam review all the creatures that have been formed over the billions or hundreds of millions of years and none of them was equal to Adam. None of them is able to be a friend, a companion of Adam and so God takes Adam in the story and from Adam forms Eve, the first woman. And Adam says, "Here is flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone. We're the same, we're equal, we're one."

And so that's the truth and so within that context, the question about divorce obviously will get a very different answer than the one that Moses had given and Mark makes this clear -- if there's going to be a breakup, it's not just the right of the husband to get rid of his wife or vice versa. Both should be striving to live in such a way that they become one, because God has made them to be one in this beautiful symbol of marriage, which symbolizes the very love of Jesus for his church. So divorce, if it were to happen, is a terrible tragedy. Once people are joined together, a man and a woman, sealed in the covenant of God's love, it can never be broken. It doesn't always happen that way, that there is such a deep covenant, but when it does, then there's equality, there's mutuality, and that's the only way that two people can really continue to live in married love as one -- when there's total respect and reverence for each other and mutuality. And so Jesus goes far beyond the question that the Pharisees asked and teaches us about the profound equality of all people, men and women.

There are some important applications of that, of course. First of all, as I already mentioned, in marriage, but also we should think about this when we come to vote on Nov. 7. Proposal 2* is a proposal that has to deal with trying to make our society here in Michigan a more equal society, and so we want to vote to keep equality within our society. We might not immediately think of such proposals as something that have moral content, but they do and this one certainly does. We should be reading those articles that are in the bulletin and determining how we're going to vote.

This myth and this important teaching about the equality of all people also has implications in the church. Just recently I read an article about Pope Benedict reviewing the situation of women in the Vatican Offices. There's been some attempt to bring about more equality there and to have women appointed to important positions. Well, it turns out when they did the review -- you're probably not surprised at this -- very few women are even present within the Vatican Curia and *none* of them has a truly responsible office. What's even worse is that the pope says, "Well, that's OK because canon law says that no woman may have an office in the church." Well, that's wrong. There's no reason why -- I'm not saying ordination right now -- but there's no reason why woman can't hold offices within the church and [and the prohibition against this] is as recent as 1983, the current Code of Canon Law.

Jesus worked so hard to make sure his community of disciples was a community of equals that it's a terrible distortion for us to have our church continue to be a community where there are some who have power and position and in fact, contrary to everything Jesus said, can lord it over others. We have a church that is not reflective of the truths that come through in this very important myth about creation where everyone is made equal and where Jesus then in his teaching tries to insist that no one is to lord it over another in his community of disciples.

And so that's the very first, and maybe in some ways the most important, lesson that we draw from today's Scriptures, but there is another one, and it comes, too, from this myth of creation -- the profound truth that none of us can really thrive as a human person alone. Adam was alone, and in this story God, in a sense, feels sorry for Adam. He's so lonely. And so this myth is reminding us that none of us can thrive and

really come to fullness of our humanness if we're alone; if we do not have friends.

There's a beautiful passage in the Book of Sirach that I sometimes use at a wedding because it's such a beautiful thing. In marriage two people become, or try to become, very close friends. "The faithful friend is a secure refuge, whoever has found one has found a treasure. A faithful friend is beyond all price. Hold your friend as priceless." And that's true -- a friend is so important. All of us need to have friends. And that's why the last part of today's Gospel is important.

At first when I read it, it seemed a little strange to me to tack on this part about Jesus calling forth that child and saying, "No one can enter the reign of God unless you become like this child." Entering the reign of God would enable us to have friends, deep loving friendships, but you can't do it unless you become like a child -- why? Well, because a child is someone who's open. Children are honest; they'll tell you the truth without trying to sugarcoat it. And they're very vulnerable. See, and those are qualities that you need to be friends and to have friends. You have to be honest and open. Trust another person enough to share who you really are. In fact, at the Last Supper Jesus tells his disciples, "I no longer call you servants, I call you friends," and then he says, "Why? Because I have revealed to you everything God has revealed to me." Jesus has been totally open with them; honest, vulnerable, and that's what a child is. So we must become like that.

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And as I thought about this, I couldn't help but think about what's been in the news so much this past week. A very sad situation, isn't it, about that congress person, Mark Foley. Obviously a very lonely person. And it's not because he is gay that he got into trouble with those explicit messages that he sent. I would never want to suggest that. But I do believe that he was unable to have -- and the more you read about him the more this seems true -- have deep and real friendships. Why? Because he could never reveal who he really is. As a gay man he was forced to live in what we call a "closet." So he's living in denial. He's living a lie about himself. Not revealing who he really is. And no one can do that without suffering great harm to who you are and making it impossible to have deep, intimate relationships. That's a tragedy. And so certainly in our society this is one of the other barriers we have to break down -- the fact that people who are gay or lesbian cannot openly be who they are. We force them to lie, to deny their reality, and that's very wrong, and of course it prevents them from becoming genuinely friends because we have to be honest and open and vulnerable in order to be a friend, and to allow ourselves to receive friends into our lives.

The more we think about this myth of creation, then, and understand its underlying truths, the more we begin to understand, perhaps, how we have to change. Change in our thinking, change in the way we act toward one another, and trying to become friends to one another. And maybe as a final word, we should remember what that short passage from the Letter to the Hebrews told us today about Jesus: He came in order to be our friend. And he came and he was very honest and open with us. He said, "I have revealed to you everything God reveals to me." He was willing to undergo suffering in order to achieve the bond of friendship with all of us, so that we become his sisters and brothers, the deepest friends that we can be to him.

As we try to undergo change in our thinking, undergo change in the way we act towards one another, it will require some change in our lives that will perhaps bring some difficulty or suffering to us. But that difficulty or suffering can be purifying and refining. It can enable us then to become the true disciples Jesus wants us to be and to follow his way of equality, of friendship, of love, of mutuality that will enable each one of us to become the full human person God wants us to be. It will enable all of us to live

together in our human family, our parish family and within our society, in a way that we can bring forth the peace and the joy that marks the reign of God.

***Editor's Note:** Proposal 2 is the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative. It would amend the Michigan constitution to ban affirmative action programs that give special consideration to groups or individuals based on race and gender in public education and college admissions, government contracting and government employment.

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