

Pentecost 19, 10.3.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 8; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

“The Perfection of Suffering Together”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Today’s readings are not easy. They combine words about divorce that can make us feel uncomfortable, with words about the blessings of child-like faith that we also find comforting. Today’s readings are about God’s intention for genuine human community in which human beings believe in one another, suffer together, and are perfected in their relationship to God and each other.

The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that salvation is perfected through the suffering of Christ. This, of course, means that genuine human community is also perfected as we suffer with and for one another. I think this says a lot about marriage. Are we willing to suffer with and for our spouse? To live as one flesh, as one body, will require both suffering for and with the other person.

In today’s gospel Jesus addresses divorce as a sinful reminder of the brokenness of human community. Jesus says that in marriage, *“the two shall become one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”* For Jesus, the issue of divorce is the issue of separating, through human law, what God has brought together.

The Pharisees came to Jesus with a question meant to test him, *“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”* Jesus answered them, *“What did Moses command you?”* They answered, *“Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.”* Here we see the clash between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus told them that Moses had provided them with this commandment because of their *“hardness of heart.”* In other words, Moses knew full well that human beings are sinful and broken, and that divorce is an unfortunate reality of this sinfulness, the *“hardness of the heart.”* Jesus was simply pointing out that the divorce that Moses allowed was not the original intent in which God created humanity to live in faithfulness to one another and to God.

Jesus makes it clear that God intended for human beings to live in faithful community with one another. Human community in the home and in the world is marked by faithfulness to God and to one another. God created human beings to care for one another. Indeed, the text from Genesis reads that the man gave names to all living things, *“but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.”* God created human beings in God’s own image to care for and to help one another. The first two humans were created male and female. They bore the image of God; they loved one another and obeyed God.

Psalm 8 reads, “*What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.*” This is what Jesus is speaking about: God created human beings in the divine image and crowned them with glory and honor. They were created to help one another and to worship God.

We all know, however, that the image of God is blurred and distorted by human sin. Jesus laid bare the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who acted as if the law could replace the image of God lost through sinfulness. By saying, “*Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her,*” the Pharisees unwittingly showed how much the image of God had been blurred in themselves. Their own “*hardness of heart*” showed that they allowed a wife, and all women, to be treated without glory and honor.

I doubt that many people would like to return to the ancient world. The rights of women in the ancient world were not the rights we expect and seek to honor in today’s world. I would be surprised if any would want to return to the Pharisaic understanding of marriage that allowed a man to divorce a woman at will. Notice that it did not work the other way. Women could not write a certificate of dismissal and divorce their husbands at will. The world has changed for the better. We believe that the rights of women, children and all people are sacred. As the Psalmist writes, “*You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.*”

Jesus’ debate with the Pharisees reveals how culturally and historically normed marriage was in the ancient world. It is the same today. Our modern understanding of marriage has been broadened. Today’s message about faithfulness in marriage is spoken to a congregation with both heterosexual and same sex couples.

The point of Jesus’ argument about faithfulness extends to all of us, no matter our gender or identity. The metaphor of “one flesh” is a profound metaphor about “one life together” over a lifetime. Christian marriage is a commitment to one another that crowns one’s spouse “with glory and honor” because God has given you one another in marriage as helpers and partners for life.

There is a scene in a film that Mari and I have watched umpteen times, in both English and in Japanese. It’s an old film starring Irene Dunne and Cary Grant titled, *The Awful Truth*. Sure, it’s a romantic comedy, but it is also a film about overcoming broken trust and reconciliation. There is a scene in which Irene Dunne’s character, named Lucy, calls her lawyer at his home about getting a divorce.

It’s the dinner hour, so imagine the scene. *The phone rings and the lawyer answers:* “Hello? Well, hello, Lucy. Divorce? What you and Jerry? Now, now Lucy, don’t do anything in haste that you

might regret, marriage is a beautiful thing..." *The lawyer's wife interrupts*: "Why can't they call you back after we've finished eating?" *The lawyer to his wife*: "Will you please be quiet?" *(returning to Lucy on the phone)*: "I'd hate to see you take any hasty action...marriage is a beautiful thing..." *His wife again interrupts*: "Why don't you finish your meal? Why can't they call you back later?" *The lawyer (again to his wife)*: "Will you shut your mouth!" "As I was saying, Lucy, marriage is a beautiful thing. When you've been married as long as I have, you'll appreciate it too." *The wife again interrupts*: "Your food is getting ice cold. You're always complaining about your food." *The lawyer covers the phone and speaks to his wife*: "Will you shut your big mouth, I'll eat when I get good and ready, and if you don't like it you know what you can do, so shut up." *The scene ends as the lawyer says*: "Lucy, darling, marriage is a beautiful thing..." (*the scene fades*).

Though this scene is funny, it is also "the awful truth" about human relationships. We have all said things that we regret to our spouse and to those whom we love. Though God crowned human beings "with glory and honor" all of us have said things in haste and anger – without glory and without honor – to the one we love. Jesus' debate with the Pharisees lays bare their sinfulness and hardness of heart toward someone who has been given as God's helper and partner in life, someone God crowned with glory and honor in God's image.

To help us understand, Jesus pointed to the model of child-like faith, encouraging children to come to him. Jesus said, "*Let the little children come to me...for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.*" One of the things that little children are very good at is unconditional trust. Trust is the essential part of any meaningful relationship, and it is essential to marriage.

By using this example, Jesus is also teaching about trust in all relationships. Jesus is talking about our relationship with God, and about our relationships with those whom God has given to us as helpers and partners in life.

Paul wrote something to the Romans that has stayed with me: "*Receive one another, therefore, just as Christ has received you, for the glory of God*" (Romans 15:7). We are to receive the kingdom as small children, and we are to receive one another as Christ has received us – for the glory of God. The glory of God is revealed in Jesus, who is the pioneer of our salvation, perfecting it through suffering.

In marriage "*the two shall become one flesh...they are no longer two, but one flesh.*" When two people are married *they become one*, which means if one suffers, they both suffer together. If one experiences joy, they both experience joy together. Therefore, receive one another like a child

receives the kingdom. Welcome and receive one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. Jesus welcomes each of us, no matter who we are or how we are.

Jesus welcomes and perfects us through his suffering on the cross. Martin Luther called the redemptive suffering of Jesus, “the love of the cross.” The love of the cross transforms us from sinful people into righteous people – restoring the image of God lost to sin.

The trouble with the Pharisees’ understanding of marriage and divorce is that it refused to see the glory of God in the other person. It treated the woman as a thing, rather than as a helper and partner made in the image of God. The thing about suffering together is that it leads to a stronger bond and relationship. The crucial words here are “to suffer together.”

The beauty of the Letter to the Hebrews is its witness that salvation is perfected through Jesus who suffers with and for us. When we welcome one another as Christ welcomes us, we also suffer with them – be that person our husband, our wife, our children, our friends or even a stranger. God has crowned all people “with glory and honor”; all people are worthy of the suffering love of Christ, so we also to share in the sufferings of God for others.

A moment ago I shared a scene from an old sentimental film. The lawyer counseled Lucy over the phone, “Lucy, darling, marriage is a beautiful thing.” Marriage *is* a beautiful thing when we are able to suffer with one another, and receive one another, imperfections and all, because this is what Christ also does for us.

Marriage is a beautiful thing because a couple receives one another as Christ has already received each of them. Through water and the word, through Holy Baptism, we are each made holy, and the divine image of God is restored in us. We are made children of God so that we might receive the kingdom, and that we might receive one another. In all our human community, may we discover the perfection of receiving others as Christ receives us, sharing in their sufferings and joys.

Though our understanding of human identity has changed throughout history and culture, understanding our identity as children of God, redeemed by water and the word, is unchanging and eternal. To be in the body of Christ, is to bear the image of God, restored in our baptism into Christ Jesus.

Welcome one another as a child welcomes the kingdom. Welcome one another because we have each been created in the divine image with glory and honor.

Welcome one another, suffer with one another, for the glory of God. Amen.