

Children

Boys and girls, how many of you are eager to grow up? (Let them tell you.) Why would you like to be older than you are now? (They will offer a galaxy of reasons.) Sometimes it seems as though it would be better if we could be different from what we are already. Maybe we would like to be older. Some of us (believe it or not) would like to be younger. Or we may want to be more famous. Or to have more money. Or to live somewhere else. Or to have different friends.

Children often want to be adults instead of children. And in some ways that is good. God made us so that we would mature and grow up. But today I want to remind you about one of the special advantages of being a child. Can you think of anything? (See what they may suggest.) Yes, you're right. In many ways life is easier when you are a child. You don't have to worry about making a living yet. You can spend a lot of time playing and enjoying your friends. You don't have to make a lot of decisions that you will have to make later on.

But there is another special advantage to being a child. Jesus spoke about it in today's Gospel story. He said, "Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." Now, what do you think Jesus meant by that? (Talk about this.)

I don't think Jesus meant to say that God doesn't want anybody to grow up, or that children are better than adults. (And by the way, Jesus also doesn't want us to think that adults are better than children.) I think the main thing Jesus is teaching us is that children have something about them that is special and that helps us know God better. What do you think that is? (Let them offer some answers.) Perhaps the main thing children have that adults don't have sometimes is an open and trusting heart. Children often accept what is told them without asking for a lot of reasons or explanations or proofs. They simply believe it because they trust who said it. That's what God wants from all of us, children and adults. He wants us to trust and believe his promises, like a child.

I

Most of you look back with joy to your wedding day. Some of you are planning your wedding day. I think some of our young ladies started planning their wedding at around age 8. Weddings demand a lot of preparation. Well, maybe not 15 to 20 years, but in our American society, most wedding preparations take at least a year. There's the church---I hope they don't demand we meet too many times; the reception---where can we have a beautiful yet unique party and still get the most for our money?; the dresses--how can we be sure that all the girls look wonderful while the bride looks spectacular?; the flowers, the photos, oh yes, the guest lists and seating chart---who should we sit next to nasty old Aunt Martha?.....wait did the priest RSVP? etc. etc. Weddings are fun, particularly when they are other people's weddings.

Today's first reading presents the first wedding, well, sort of. Actually it presents the foundation of marriage. We heard about the creation of Eve from one of Adam's ribs. Not out of his feet to be stepped upon or out of his head to lord over him but out of his side next to his heart to be loved and under his arm to be protected. From that point on, Eve counted Adam's ribs every night to be sure he was being faithful. OK, that wasn't in *Genesis*. Back to the scripture. The creation of Eve and the union of Adam and Eve seems to be a very simple story, one that might even appear to be childlike. But it isn't as simple as it might appear. The stories in *Genesis* are, in fact, deep meditations on the great questions of humanity: the origins of the universe and humankind, life, evil, and death. They were set in *Genesis* by inspired sages, wise men who believed profoundly in the hand of God. Everything happened because the Creator, in the beginning, so willed it. Nothing is the result of chance or accident.

These sages pondered the mystery of man and woman and the deep-seated impulse that attracts them to each other. Why is it that people marry? Why is it that people who appear very happy in the single state feel compelled to alter their lives and marry? *Genesis* presents the conviction of the sages that marriage came from God. It is willed by God, and it is good.

There are two accounts of creation in *Genesis*. The first account is found in the first chapter. That's the one of the seven days. The passage we have today comes from the second account, found in the second chapter of *Genesis*. Actually, this is the older of the two traditions of creation. It begins immediately with the creation of man from the clay of the ground. In a beautiful poetic image, God breathes into man's nostrils the breath of life and man becomes a living being. In this account of creation, man comes before all other living beings. Only after man is created does God plant a garden to place man in and call upon him to till it and care for it. The garden, Eden, was splendid, irrigated by a great river divided into four branches, with trees bearing excellent fruit. But the man was alone. It is not good for a man to be alone and many married women understand that. This solitude was not good for him. God therefore decided to create a suitable partner for the man. God formed out of the ground various wild animals and birds of the air, and He brought them to the man to see what he would call them. So sorry Dogs are not man's best friends. They are made of the same matter as the man, but God does not breathe into them the breath of His

life. They march past the man, and the man names them. In naming name it shows dominion over them. To this day I wonder why my family gave me the name that they did. Mankind is given mastery over all living beings and entrusted with their care. He names them. He describes their essence. And he knows that none of them are a suitable partner for him.

By discovering the world around him, its riches, its abundance of life, the man is faced with the realization that he is a creature set apart, a living being of a kind that is completely different than the innumerable beings that populate the sky and the earth. He can define all other living beings, call them by their names, but among them none are able in turn to name him, to act as someone with whom he can have a dialogue. There is no one on an equal footing with the man. No one with whom he can speak. No one with whom he can say, "You and I." Without someone to whom he could relate, man could not be made in the image of God. For God himself is not in solitude. The essence of God is plural in an infinite movement of love. The Other is in Him and He is in the Other. The movement of their love creates the Trinity. The mystery of the singular and the plural in God, would need to be created within mankind for man to be truly made in God's image.

Therefore, from the beginning God said, "I will make a suitable partner for the man." The Lord cast a deep sleep upon the man. Why the sleep? The deep sleep of the man is man not yet completed, not yet capable of opening his eyes to the world. It is an excited sleep because he feels in his very being something great is going to happen. The deep sleep returns the story to the first moment of human creation. Using a rib instead of the clay of the earth, God creates a like creature for the man, someone with whom he can relate, someone with whom he could cry out with wonder, "This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." The account emphasizes that from the beginning man and woman are created for each other as perfectly matched partners. "That is why," the passage concludes, "that is why a man breaks all other bonds, leaves father and mother, to cling to the woman who clings to him. The two become one flesh. Honestly, we do not know why we love the person we do, but we do know the woman is given her origin a point from which to grow. A man is given is the person who will complete him and make him whole.

The ancient sages who wrote this account of Genesis are emphasizing that the attraction of men and women for each other comes from God. Sexuality has dignity, the dignity of the Divine. It is the desire to image God that drives men and women to union of lives, not just bodily needs. Men and women differ from the animals in that it is the search for communion that draws them together, not the impulse of carnal, uncontrollable and blind instinct. Men and women do not mate like animals. Men and women create a union of persons that reflects the union of the Triune God.

Now I am going to get even deeper. The difference of man and woman is far more profound and far more complementary than the physical aspects of this difference. Men and women are created to image with each other God's infinite love

within the essence of His being. The sacrament of marriage, is not just a blessing of two individuals. It is the creation of a new reflection of the Love of God on earth.

For you who are married, understand how important you are to us all! We the single, we the celibate, we the separated, we the divorced, we the widowed, need you the married to embrace and to live the ideal of marriage.

And if you are planning a wedding, be it within a year, or 20 years from now, don't limit your wedding to all those fringe wedding accouterments. Don't just have a wedding. Choose to be married, really and truly married as God designed marriage. Allow God to be the center of your love. And then celebrate His Presence in the mystery of the single and the plural, in the mystery of marriage.

I pray every day for our married couples. I am edified by the way our husbands and wives happily make continual sacrifices for each other. I know that the ideal of marriage is difficult. But I also know that God gives you the strength to grow through all the challenges of life.

Together today we pray that all our married couples might continue to give witness to the presence of God in the union of husband and wife.

II

A young couple decided to wed. As the big day approached, they grew apprehensive. Each had a problem they had never before shared with anyone, not even each other.

The groom-to-be, overcoming his fear, decided to ask his father for advice. "Dad," he said, "I am deeply concerned about the success of my marriage. I love my fiancée very much, but you see, I have very smelly feet, and I'm afraid that my future wife will be put off by them."

"No problem," said his dad. "All you have to do is wash your feet as often as possible and always wear socks, even to bed." Well, to him this seemed a workable solution.

The bride-to-be, overcoming her fear, decided to take her problem up with her mom. "Mom," she said, "When I wake up in the morning my breath is truly awful."

"Honey," her mother consoled, "everyone has bad breath in the morning."

"No, you don't understand. My morning breath is so bad, I'm afraid that my new husband will not want to sleep in the same room with me."

Her mother said simply, "Try this. In the morning, get straight out of bed and head for the bathroom and brush your teeth. The key is not to say a word until you've brushed your teeth. Not a word," her mother affirmed. Well, she thought it was certainly worth a try.

The loving couple was finally married in a beautiful ceremony. Not forgetting the advice each had received, he with his perpetual socks and she with her morning silence, they managed quite well. That is, until about six months later.

Shortly before dawn, the husband woke with a start to find that one of his socks had come off. Fearful of the consequences, he frantically searched the bed. This, of course, woke his bride, who without thinking, immediately asked, "What on earth are you doing?"

"Oh, no!" he gasped in shock, "You've swallowed my sock!" (1)

It is strange to be in Iowa during a presidential campaign. One sees advertisements

everywhere. Every other TV ad presents yet another smiling face, another pithy slogan, and some idealistic scene. Each potential candidate appeals to some value that resonates with our culture: freedom, honesty, justice, taxation, and American history. This one will restore this; that candidate will fight for something else. Whether any of them can really change things is another question.

But can humans live without ideals? We all have pictures in our heads about the way things should be, and the scriptures this week underscore an ideal I've heard again and again in my decades of preparing people for marriage: every couple wants their marriage to be total, permanent, exclusive, and filled with love. Every couple expects its marriage to endure.

Of course, it's in the very nature of love to give oneself to the beloved. And if we are going to do that, we cannot do that only in part. We don't truly love with only part of ourselves, or only for a part of our years, or only under certain conditions. The values of marriage which we believers have upheld, in Christ, are the values that speak to the truths of human love.

With the World Meeting on the Family in Philadelphia last week, and the upcoming Synod next month, these ideals will be articulated with particular strength. They are important not only for what we think marriage is about, but also for the reality of our families. Children need the faithfulness of their parents. Children need the stable and abiding love of their mothers and fathers. If this love is missing, if they cannot sense this love, it takes many years to find a stable base, to overcome the self-questioning: what happened with mommy and daddy? Was it my fault?

Of course, we have this ideal about marriage because we have this ideal about God. God loves us totally and completely, unconditionally, and shows this love in Jesus Christ. Breakups, divorce, infidelity—these have nothing to do with the love that God shows us. How can they be part of our lives?

Yet they are, aren't they? Marriages break up despite the best intentions of the parties when they marry. People grow apart. Things happen that destroy the relationship. And this is a burden not only for the couple, not only for the family, but for society itself. We all carry the scars of vows that were not able to be fulfilled. When faithfulness is broken, we are all broken. What then should we do? Two things.

First, we have to support those people who have suffered the breakdown of their marriage. Beyond any fault, beyond any shame, we have to be with people in their trauma, if only to accompany them. Divorce is a great experience of separation, almost one of abandonment. Divorced people should not feel further abandoned. We can treat divorce better as a wound than as a moral flaw. When Aldous Huxley wrote his famous novel about the future, *Brave New World*, he predicted that some day marriage licenses would be sold just like dog licenses--good for only twelve months. Furthermore, you would be able to use them for a different "pet"--I mean, spouse--each time, if that's what you want. And you could purchase as many as makes you happy!

Fortunately we are not at that state yet, but who can doubt that traditional marriages are facing difficulties. Marriages are coming apart at an alarming rate. Sometimes there are some very understandable reasons why a marriage comes apart. And few of us are in a position to point fingers. Nearly every family has been touched in some way by this epidemic, both inside and outside the church.

Actually, not all Pharisees took such a relaxed view of marriage. Rabbi Shammai, one of the important rabbis of the day, allowed divorce only if the wife was guilty of sexual immorality. A better known rabbi however, Rabbi Hillel, allowed a husband to divorce his wife for almost any reason. In that day of overt sexism, of course, neither rabbi could have imagined women divorcing their husband.

In Mark 10 some Pharisees approached Jesus to test him to see what he believed about divorce and remarriage. Now, it's important to see that the Pharisees didn't really care what Jesus thought about marriage. This was a test. They wanted him to give a self-incriminating response that would arouse opposition against him. Maybe, they thought, he would contradict the commands of Moses in Deuteronomy. Perhaps they expected Jesus to take sides among the rabbinic schools in this dispute, thereby splitting the ranks of his followers. Or maybe in his response, he would offend Herod Antipas as John the Baptist did and be arrested and executed, since he was under Herod's jurisdiction.

Jesus, however, did none of the above. He skipped right over Moses' teaching to the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis. He wanted to educate the Pharisees as to God's ideal for marriage. Moses wrote the law in Deuteronomy allowing divorce, Jesus said, in view of the hardheartedness of the people in refusing to accept God's ideal of love, commitment and forgiveness. Jesus then contrasts their view of marriage with God's view from the beginning of creation. Now you, too, may ask what is God's view?

According to Genesis 2:21-24, God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of Adam's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of Adam, and he brought her to Adam. And Adam said, "Wow!" or something like that. Then he added, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

Secondly, we have to, as believers, rally around those elements of society that support faithfulness, and put aside those elements which do not. So much of our public media presumes unfaithfulness, casual attitudes toward sex, a personal freedom at any cost. We see this on TV, in movies, and in the books we read. All of this creates an environment in which the ideals we hold, and the values of God, become obscured. Without being pruders or prigs, we have to

speak up and say what our values are, because this speaks the truth of our own natures and the truth of God.

The Letter to the Hebrews talks about the way God has united himself to us in Jesus who becomes our mediator, one among us. Christ took on the brokenness of our lives that we might overcome brokenness in his Kingdom. When we live our ideals, and live the pattern of love God gave us, the Kingdom becomes clearer, more accessible, more fully present in our lives. With Christ, we treasure every vow we make, especially those that reflect his life and love.

III

In the year 311 BC a marriage contract in Egypt was drawn up for Heraclides and Demetria, both from the town of Koan.

The contract specified that the bride was bringing into the marriage clothing and bling worth a thousand drachmas. Heraclides, meanwhile, agreed to support Demetria according to what was fitting for a freeborn woman. As to where the two of them would live, that would be whatever they both agreed to after consulting with each other.

This marriage, like some that we read about, also had prenuptial conditions, as far as divorce was concerned. If Demetria did not act in an appropriate manner, Heraclides could send her away without any of the wealth she'd brought into the marriage but only — and this was key, if three men agreed he was right, and both husband and wife had to agree on this three person panel!

Conversely, if Heraclides brought in other women to live in the house to shame Demetria, or had children by other women, or if he wronged Demetria in any way whatsoever she would not only keep the wealth she brought into the relationship but he would have to give her an extra thousand drachmas. Once again, a three person panel was involved, and both sides had to approve the arbitrators.

Unlike many marriage customs around the world, not only in the ancient past but in the present, that give all the power to men and none to women, these two Egyptian freeborn people seem to have entered into an agreement where there were safeguards to protect both of them.

Certainly it doesn't sound as if women had any degree of mutual protection in biblical times, judging from the way the Pharisees describe the law of Moses.

Or did they?

This present scripture has been used in the past to guarantee almost a master/slave relationship between husbands and wives. It has been used to force women to stay in abusive relationships. It has meant, in practical terms, that in some churches those who are divorced against their own wish find they cannot be a part of the life of the church they grew up in. They become pariahs, and in the end are driven away from the church.

What did Jesus mean by these words? What do these words really mean?

Perhaps a clue is to be found in the second part of today's gospel passage where the subject shifts from the rights of wives, or the lack of them, to the place of children in the kingdom of God. Because, as we will see, Jesus is speaking about two very vulnerable groups, who at that time, and in most times, had very few legal protections.

Let's look at the first part first. The passage as we have it seems simple enough. Jesus is busy teaching the people when some Pharisees came to ask him a question with the specific intention of testing him and trapping him. To a certain extent they did not really care about the answer. They simply hoped that whatever Jesus said, aye or nay, would give them

sufficient grounds for condemning Jesus on the charge that he did not follow the law of Moses.

Note that the incident begins with the phrase “Some Pharisees...”. Some Christians seem to think that all Pharisees were villains, evil Bible misinterpreters who tried to hold people in the chains of legalistic interpretations of scripture. This is simply untrue. We’re only talking about the stinkers here. If we lived in first century Judea, we would have attended a synagogue which was administered by a leader who was a Pharisee. Our pastor would probably have been a Pharisee. He would have been the person who stood up for us, preached on the scriptures for us, and looked after our spiritual needs. Unlike Sadducees who had little interest in common people, or the communal societies like the Essenes which raised the bar very high when it came to standards of behavior, we would have found the Pharisees to be our kind of people.

These particular Pharisees, at any rate, seemed to be recognizing Jesus had authority when it came to interpreting scripture, for they asked him a question about the law of Moses — “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

Though it seems like a compliment, they were of course trying to trap him. And Jesus, as he did on more than one occasion, answered a question with a question. “What did Moses command you?”

By Moses, Jesus is referring to the Torah, the first five books of our Bible. These ancient books told the history of the people and gave case law. To Jesus’ question these Pharisees gave a simple reply: “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.”

They were referring to Deuteronomy 24:1-5. I’m going to read you the first two verses of this passage. I’ll read the other three verses in a few minutes, for reasons you’ll understand a little later.

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife.

The law seems to be very clear — if the man decides for whatever reason he wants a divorce, he gets a divorce. It is cut and dried. What’s to argue about?

But if you read the law of Moses from beginning to end you’ll begin to notice something odd — there’s no wedding service in the Bible. Weddings took place, and were probably performed according to custom, but most of the words that may have been spoken at your own wedding, or a wedding you attended have come from human custom and practice.

The same is true when it comes to divorce. Divorce took place among God’s people, again according to the customs that had developed among them, but the references to divorce in

the law and the prophets only indirectly referred to these practices. This particular scripture speaks to only a few specific incidents.

These Pharisees were literally taking what was meant to be case law for a specific instance and applying it literally and universally.

Poet and scholar Robert Alter, in his translation of the Torah, rendered the phrase “something objectionable” as “he finds in her some shamefully exposed thing.” The Jewish Publication Society’s translation said “he finds something obnoxious” about her. Duane L. Christensen’s translation for the Word Biblical Commentary is very literal: “...because he finds in her ‘a naked thing...’” The implication is that she is engaged in public lewd and sexual misbehavior. It has nothing to do with whether she has failed to please her husband in the ordinary course of events.

So there’s more than meets the eye in this passage. Deuteronomy goes on to say:

Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession.

Some commentators suggest that this passage in its entirety is stating that men could not divorce their wives, marry another, then divorce that wife and remarry the first wife as a way of swapping wives and still staying within custom and law. This piece of case law goes even further. Deuteronomy 24:5 says, “*When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be charged with any related duty. He shall be free at home one year, to be happy with the wife whom he has married.*”

This addition to the law about divorce is designed to stop people from divorcing their current wife, then temporarily marrying another woman, in order to avoid military service, and then remarrying their first wife. So far from giving men *carte blanche* to divorce wives casually, this law prevented them from divorcing to swap wives or dodge the draft.

Jesus knew this. Jesus knew scripture. He ought to. Jesus also knew that the Hebrew words were referring to extraordinarily lewd public behavior, so he replied, scornfully one imagines, that this law had more to do with their hardness of heart — something we associate with the tyranny of a Pharaoh, than permission to divorce as one pleased.

Jesus, as elsewhere, pushed the law to its limit for these individuals, and in doing so fulfilled the law, as he put it elsewhere. Remember the Sermon on the Mount? Jesus said “You have heard it said...” and told those listening that while the law forbade murder, those who insulted their brothers and sisters were murdering the self-esteem and integrity of another human being, through their verbal abuse. He said that the law forbade adultery, but those who lusted in their heart were committing adultery as well. He said that the law told us to love our neighbors, and that even our enemies were our neighbors, and we were to love them too.

Jesus goes back further than Deuteronomy, all the way to the deeps of time and creation. Genesis goes back farther than Moses. Jesus showed that marriage is hallowed by God at the beginning of time, and therefore those who interpret this law from Deuteronomy as something that allowed them to divorce a spouse for the slightest reason were opening themselves up to the charge of adultery. He therefore created a whole new case law for those who thought they could dispose of women on a whim. They couldn't.

Later, when his disciples in private seemed to worriedly ask about this, Jesus repeated what he had said. Whoever divorced their spouse and remarried is an adulterer.

More insight can be gained by looking at the next four verses of today's passage. People brought little children to Jesus, hoping for even a touch from the master's hand, and the disciples, like many church busybodies, did their best to keep the children at bay, but Jesus, when he saw this, responded indignantly, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

At the time of Jesus, children represented one of the most vulnerable populations. They had no rights, and relatively little value, until they were able to share in the family's craft or agriculture. They were expected to work, and until they worked, they were a waste of time for someone like Jesus, at least in the eyes of the apostles. But Jesus told us that those on the margins of society — little children, women, women who have been divorced — are ones God favors. God's law protects them. God's people ought to encourage them.

When Jesus said "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it," he may not have been saying what we usually think he was saying — that there is something pure and innocent about childhood and we need to bring that to the table. No, Jesus was saying that in order to be part of God's people we can't act like God owes us anything, as if we were workers paid by the hour or by the job.

Jesus was suggesting that despite our high opinion of ourselves we have no apparent monetary value, much like children before they're able to help with the family business. Therefore we all, whether we have a high opinion of ourselves or not, depend on God's grace. All of us are in that position of being given the priceless gift as a child — our value comes from God's estimation, and not the work we do.

That is what that whole grace thing is about.

If you want a good example of what Jesus thinks about the divorced — see the story about the woman at the well, in the gospel of John. This woman had been married five times, and she wasn't legally married to her current beau. Yet Jesus asked her for a drink of water, demonstrating that whatever barriers his society put up against the two of them conversing he was willing to ignore. Jesus offered her the living water, which would sustain her spiritually. And this woman became the evangelist that brought her whole village into the fold.

The truth is, just like that marriage contract I referred to at the beginning of this message, God's people had worked out over the centuries equitable ways to protect people in marriage, and to protect them in divorce as well.

Divorce is never a great outcome. No one goes into a wedding thinking, "If this doesn't work out I'll just bail on the whole marriage thing." But there are abusers and there are abused people, and no one has the right to tyrannize another human being. In our own time we are recognizing that those who are terrorized, abused, and misused, male or female, have a right to begin anew.

Rather than being hard-hearted, at least until we ourselves are forced to throw ourselves before the throne of mercy for much-needed grace, let us offer each other kindness and understanding. Let us dedicate ourselves to protecting the most vulnerable in our society. This is how it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, in the kingdom of grace and good news.

Amen.

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