

October 8, 2006  
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18 Pentecost (22B)

## LOVE AND MARRIAGE

In Ordained ministry there aren't many activities that are more enjoyable or filled with all the creative possibilities as that of Pre-Marriage Counseling. (Once a year we get the lessons that bring to our attention this important sacrament of the Church.) It presents all of the potential of human life right before one's eyes. At the very core of our understanding of human life is the creational fact that we are not to be alone. In Genesis the man's not being alone correlates with God's not being alone. God identifies a problem with the state of creation at this point and moves to make changes that would improve it.

Lets look at some points of interest in the Genesis account this morning. The word "*helper*" carries no implications regarding the status of the one who helps: indeed, God is often called the helper of human beings as in Psalm 121:1-2. There is no hierarchy involved here.

Phyllis Tribble observes that God, who dominates the narrative up to this point, now recedes into the background, "not as the authoritarian controller of events but as the generous delegator of power who even forfeits

the right to reverse human decisions.” It takes God two tries to satisfy the man in creating a ‘helper.’

The man recognizes that the woman will address the stated need. God recognizes the creational import of this human decision, for no additional divine word or act follows. God lets the man’s exultation over the woman fill the scene; the human word [the first one uttered] serves as an evaluation that this situation may be termed “good”. The narrator in verses 24-25 then draws the reader into the closeness of the male-female bond, citing the implication of the human decision for the future. The bond involves more than issues of procreation; the relationship includes companionship, intimate and otherwise. There is a ‘complimentarity’ here that God always intended in our relationship with each other and in our relationship with Him.

The woman is in no way subordinate to the man because he names her but rather it becomes part of the creative process just as God does the naming in chapter 1 verses 5-10. From living material the woman comes from the man. The force of the creation is in the understanding that man and woman are created in the Image of God. God is the builder and He gives His personal attention to his creation. The naming entails a difference from, but no authority over, the woman. It is the height of kinship that is to highlight the mutuality and equality of these godly creatures. The emphasis in Genesis

is on the relationship of the man and the woman not on the woman as the bearer of children. God's creation values sexual intimacy as being good. Although this text does not speak explicitly about single human existence, it does not imply in any way that, in order to be truly human, one must be married.

The Old Testament story sets the foundation for life and its most meaningful relationships. Jesus, in Mark, does not fall into the trap of the Pharisees by debating the circumstances under which a husband might be permitted to divorce his wife, but rather Jesus asks about what God intended in creation. Jesus knows! Moses establishment of a procedure for divorce resulted from the hard heartedness of humanity, said Jesus. God intended men and women to be permanently joined in marriage, so no human tradition can claim the authority to override that fact. Jesus exploits the metaphoric possibilities of Genesis 2:24, "*they become one flesh,*" to exhibit the absurdity of thinking that divorce "law," whatever conditions it sets down, represents God's will. Divorce would be like trying to divide one person into two.

Christians have not been as adept as was their founder at avoiding the divorce business. In today's world more marriages fail than succeed. There are many elaborate legal systems for declaring that a marriage may be

declared void. Jesus would declare all of these approaches attempts to put human traditions in place of God's intention for humanity. A failed marriage presents a human tragedy for everyone involved. The pastoral responsibility of the church is to participate in healing, not in exacerbating or legitimating the tragedy of human hard heartedness. Nothing hurts more as a priest than to see a marriage you counseled in its origin get to the hardhearted never forgiving end. By the time families come to me it is usually too late for reconciliation. I am especially aware of the emotional toll paid by children of divorced parents. A part of pre-marriage counseling today is to coach couples on conflict negotiation and to understand the nature of respect necessary for a successful life together.

Jesus always treated marriage as a time of great joy. The Wedding Feast in Cana of Galilee is indicative of Jesus' view of marriage. Marriage is grounded in God's love for His creation not in any realm of the law.

Our preoccupation with 'human sexuality' today is not of God but of Satan. God's plan is being rationalized beyond recognition. We, the Church of Jesus Christ, should be a beacon of hope in discussions about this subject but instead we find ourselves consumed by debates. That we are captivated by issues surrounding something called "sexuality" is an indication of the captivity of the Church to money, class, and liberal political arrangements.

Nothing makes such a captivity more apparent than the relegation of the Church to the “private.” Sex becomes the issue before the Church because sex constitutes the realm of the “private.” Watching Christians tear themselves apart over sexual conduct not only must entertain the secular powers, but also assure them that they will face no challenge from Christians. If we live in a damaged time we fear the Church is part of the wreckage. [Hauerwas]

But like Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University I believe that living in damaged times and in a damaged Church is where God would have us be. “At times the hardest thing in the world is to be where we are,” says Rowan Williams. All the time we have is this damaged time. Williams calls this “ordinary time.” It is a time for us to take a most holy subject and deal with it as God expects us to do and not get caught up in the sectarian impulse to cut bait and run. There is no place to run. [Tombstone story]

God has given us our marching orders on relationships between males and females. We are to marry in a legal contract , heterosexually, and if not that then we are to live a celibate single life. Jesus proves that the celibate single life can be extremely meaningful. Will Willimon, noted writer and a Bishop in the United Methodist Church says: “I do not yet know how one is to hold both heterosexual and homosexual Christians accountable for their

behavior once the promises of marriage are either broken in divorce and remarriage or else greatly expanded through same-sex unions.” God would have us know that such human errors are not Church threatening issues but rather they are issues of human sin and they are to be addressed between an individual and God through Jesus Christ. The only weddings we will have in this church are between heterosexual adults. Anything else falls short of God’s creation whether in the church, the culture or in the hearts and minds of individuals.

God made us different that when we find a life-mate there is a joy beyond our belief. Time might in fact be ‘ordinary’ but with my help-mate in life it is the very best of time. When I speak to two people about their future together “for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death do you part” it covers God’s intention for a joyful life as His creature.

Don’t let the errors of the present time throw you into a sectarian tailspin. Know of the joy God intends for your life either as one married or single and as one who is a member of His loving community, the Church. Married or single there is much to do in His vineyard this day. And through it all is the joy of relationship with God and with each other. Amen.

