

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

Psalm 26

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Mark 10:2-16

The reading from Job illustrates something I often say to our Bible Study group that meets on Wednesdays: Much if not most of the time, Scripture forces us to face the big issues and ask the big questions. If the reading from Job did not viscerally upset you this morning, you were not listening. Let's be clear: The Bible does *not* always provide answers; but the Bible will always provoke you to wrestle with the big questions and do the hard work of discernment under the Spirit's guidance. Making YOU come up with your own, hopefully, spiritually discerned answers is what the Bible does for us. It teaches us discernment and makes us work it out for ourselves.

Today, our readings have given us a lot to work with. The reading from Job raises profound questions about evil, justice, and the meaning of life. The reading from Hebrews addresses the question of "Who Jesus Is" from a

Cosmic perspective, addresses the ultimate destiny of humanity, and the place of suffering in perfecting our spiritual nature. And the Gospel reading addresses questions about marriage and divorce.

Marriage is a place where people find themselves facing the big questions of life, sometimes for the first time when the realities and expectations about life together come into conflict. Marriage is also a place where we experience what it means to be perfected by suffering -- and I'm talking about a good, healthy marriage. In a bad marriage, all the same suffering goes on, but without any spiritual growth. So I want to focus on the reading about Marriage and Divorce today.

Today's gospel reading begins with a question about divorce. If you had been one of Mark's first readers you would have known all about the big divorce scandal between Herod Antipas and his brother Herod Philip (All the sons of Herod the Great were named Herod). It

seems that Antipas took a fancy to Philip's wife, Herodias. So as not to be accused of committing adultery, Herodias quietly divorced Philip first, so that she could marry Antipas.

You may remember that Herodias had John the Baptist beheaded for publicly objecting this arrangement. So when the Pharisees asked Jesus to publicly comment about his thoughts concerning the legality of divorce, it was a setup. Jesus not only answered them, but gave them all the ammo they needed to push for his execution as well: Yes, divorce is permitted. No, if you divorce in order to marry someone else, it's still adultery.

Our ideas about marriage, what it is and what it can be have changed constantly over the last 2000 years.

Marriage, in Jesus' day, was nothing at all like marriage as we understand and practice it today. In Jesus' day, men *married* and women were *given* in marriage. Marriage was essentially a property transfer from one owner, the

father, to a new owner, the husband. The reason it is different today is because the Christian teaching about the spiritual dignity of men and women has slowly seeped into our consciousness over the centuries.

One thing that caused Christianity to really stick out among the religious thinking of the day was their insistence that rich and poor, Jew and Greek, *male and female* were all spiritually equal to one another. That helps explain why God, according to Jesus, aspired to something better for us than this “giving in marriage” thing, and that, in the kingdom of heaven, “they will neither marry nor be given in marriage.”

Truth is, marriage as we practice it today is far closer to Jesus’ ideal of the kingdom and nothing at all like marriage as Jesus knew it in his day. Today, when couples marry, they come before the altar as equals and as partners to one another. There is no longer any hint of either being at any time the “property” of the other. When a couple

commits themselves to a spiritual union under the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit, they commit themselves to the formation of a spiritual union which should represent to all the world the mystical, loving spiritual unity “between Christ and his Church.” The two become one flesh, not by operation of law, not by the blessing of the Church, but by *their* commitment to nourish and call forth the best in one another, and to be the best they can be for one another. We would say, by seeking and serving Christ in one another.

Around the turn of the fourth century, St. Augustine articulated it this way. According to Augustine, Christian couples should first and foremost be committed to one another, not only as equals, but as friends. *Best Buds Forever!* Friends you can share your deepest joys with. Friends who will be there for you, no matter what.

This has continued to be a counter-cultural ideal right up unto our own day. It’s been almost 2000 years since Paul

so clearly articulated the equality of men and women, yet it's taken just much time to come around to a more spiritualized understanding of what marriage can and should be.

It has taken us 2000 years to take this teaching seriously and to begin to explore what real loving equality looks like and to really begin to live into that teaching. We are all very blessed to be among the first to catch a glimpse of what such a world might look like. What we practice today is nothing like the property transaction that was celebrated in ancient times. It's far more like what Jesus taught it would be like in the kingdom of God: They will neither take nor be taken. Already for us, marriage is not first a legal union, it is not first a sexual union, it is a spiritual union created by the couple and blessed and supported by the whole body of the Church.

Jesus views marriage first and foremost as a spiritual union in which two are joined by God. Now there seems

to have been some confusion over the centuries between the idea of “two souls joined by God” and “two souls joined by an official legal or religious institution.” For most people, it seems, they are the same thing. But Jesus also recognized that many people achieved nothing like a spiritual union in their marriages. For this reason, he said, “because of your hardness of heart,” Moses has permitted divorce.

Whether we are talking about marriage or divorce or any of the bigger issues of life and death, Jesus asks us as his disciples to look at things first from a spiritual, and not a worldly angle. Marriage is first and foremost a spiritual union, not a legal bond.

This small passage has a lot to say to us about the deeper spiritual reality that must undergird any true marriage. If you are blessed to be in such a relationship -- and I truly believe that all of you married folk in this congregation show visible signs that you already have that kind of

relationship -- then you also know how absolutely central that reality is to every breath you take.

People who build their lives around love and thanksgiving are, in the main, happier people than those who do not. Couples who build their relationships around mutual respect, love and thanksgiving have more spiritually productive and happier relationships than those who do not.

Which brings me back to Augustine. Marriage is all about being friends, in every circumstance, in wealth and in poverty, in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy.

Our view of marriage has changed constantly through the ages. The first Christian ceremony that in any way resembles what we would call a marriage ceremony comes from the fourth century and is actually nothing more than a fertility blessing performed around the family hearth. At this time marriage was still generally

understood to be a civil contractual matter between men. With the rise of clerical celibacy, marriage was “permitted” to the faithful as a “remedy for sin.”

It wasn't until the ninth century that we got a marriage ceremony anything like what we have today and we borrowed that from the Arians. It was still later in the English Church when someone suggested that, perhaps, actual consent should be a part of the wedding ceremony.

Martin Luther was the first to suggest that human sexuality might actually be a blessing and the first to perform a wedding on the actual steps of a Church.

Our own Bishop Cranmer was the first to have the audacity to suggest that a wedding should be performed in a church! And the Episcopal Church, in 1928, was the first to make the vows the same for both partners.

Today we recognize that marriage is a sacrament akin to ordination. It is an entry to a new way of living out one's Christian life. Committing ourselves to God's service as a joint undertaking is one of the greatest (and hardest) spiritual paths we can take in our journeys as Jesus' disciples. There is no other relationship we ever have that has the potential to teach us so much about ourselves. There is no relationship that will ever challenge us -- hopefully, encourage us -- to become our better and more spiritual selves. There are few other forums where we can learn, first hand, what it really means to love, *and how love, joy, and suffering, can be all bound up together in one holy, brilliant mess, more precious to us than life itself.*

There's the mystery, the mystical part of it all. It's not reasonable. It's not rational. But love truly is the center of marriage, and of everything important in our lives. A truly loving relationship with another human being can truly transform us, just as a truly loving and devoted relationship with Christ transforms our souls.

Oh, and remember that “love God, love your neighbor” thing? When you manifest the blessings of that command within your own marriage, it shows. The light of love shines for all to see, not just those sitting closest to it. It blesses us all.