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Genesis 2:18-24, Mark 10:2-16
Christ's Love for His Bride

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from our Gospel Lesson. Jesus speaks almost as if in discouragement about matters of marriage and divorce. Or better, he speaks with longing that marriage should flourish here on earth:

⁵But Jesus said to them, “For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. ⁹What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.” (Mark 10:5-9, RSV)

As the years have gone by, I have been humbled in matters of marriage and divorced. I have been chastened. When I was a young pastor, I did not yet have much experience with divorce. I bet it was a function of my age and perhaps even more a function of the neck of the woods where I had been raised. Down on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, in that fishing and farming land, there was not much divorce. My parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, my pastor and the parents of my boyhood friends, they all seemed to be happily married. And that seemed right and natural to me. Loving and cherishing each other “till death do you part” seemed to accord with the teaching of the Bible.

Furthermore, when I reached seminary, I encountered faculty who were articulate, even eloquent, in praising marriage. None of the faculty at Gettysburg in those days was divorced as far as I knew. Likewise, my seminarian friends were either happily married or were young and falling in love and getting married, as Carol and I were doing.

But the thing is, many years have passed since those days, and a surprising number of those dear friends from seminary have divorced. They are smarter and me than me. I can hardly bring myself to blame them.

So, that is part of the reason I have been humbled in matters of marriage and divorce: I have encountered divorce among dear friends.

The larger reason I try to be gentle when discussing marriage and divorce is that the individual stories about divorce almost always seem to make sense to me. Almost nobody divorces for frivolous reasons. Rather, the reasons for divorce nearly always tug on my heart. I can understand them. I find myself whispering that wonderful saying, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.”

On the other hand, I am still charmed by all the stories of old folks who have lived their lives in holy marriage. Carol often brings me home stories like that from The Wartburg. It is one of the joys of being chaplain there to see the tender love many elderly couples still have for one another.

And that is why the reaction of Jesus to the Pharisaic question in this morning's Gospel Lesson runs so true for me. Jesus knows all the ins and outs of the human heart. He knows all the legal arguments. He knows the competing rabbinic traditions of the Jewish scholars Shammai (50 BC–30 AD) and Hillel (110 BC-10 AD) concerning the key text Deuteronomy 24:1:

¹Suppose 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 (Deuteronomy 24:1, NRSV)

The legal debate concerned the meaning of the phrase “something objectionable.” Shammai was the conservative. He taught that the only thing that counted here was infidelity. Hillel was the liberal. He taught that nearly anything counted as justifying divorce, even trivial reasons like the way the woman looked or the way she cooked.¹ Of course the whole discussion was unfair to women, since it was a debate about the man divorcing the woman, while the reverse was not even contemplated.

In any event, in the days of our Lord Jesus, debates and heartaches about marriage and divorce were already old. These puzzles are not just modern. They also beset ancient folk.

So, in this morning's Gospel Lesson, a Pharisee comes up to Jesus and asks him:

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” (Mark 10:2, RSV)

Jesus starts to enter the debate, by asking about the teaching of Moses, but he soon abandons the whole matter. To me, it is as if Jesus wants to set aside all the complexities and anger and sorrow about marriage and divorce and simply start over again from the beginning:

⁵But Jesus said to them, “For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. ⁶But from the beginning of creation... (Mark 10:5, RSV)

So that is the approach I too want to use. I want to invite us back to the beginning of creation, to remind us of the intention of our Maker concerning

¹ By the way, Carol and I are hooked nowadays on an English television series called *The Tudors*, about King Henry VIII. Henry, I bet, would have liked the teaching of scholar Hillel, as when Henry goes roaring through his castle shouting about poor Ann of Cleaves, “Her appearance pleases me not! I like her not!”

marriage, and, I hope, to comfort us and appeal to us to work at the renewal of our own marriages.

To begin, let's note the delight of the man in our First Lesson, the reading from the Second Chapter of Genesis. The Lord had caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and while he slept, the Lord took one of his ribs, made Eve from that rib, and brought her to him. Upon seeing her, Adam bursts forth in praise:

²²and the rib which the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh..."

The man is smitten! He is entirely enchanted! He has been naming the animals, living with the animals, admiring the animals, shepherding the animals, but he has not lost his heart to any of the animals. But now Eve comes along, and he is blown away! "This *at last*..."

His enchantment is akin to that of little children experiencing Christmas for the first time. She gets up from bed, he wipes the sleep from his eyes. Still in their jammies they stroll into the living room and are entirely entranced by what they see: the tree and the lights and all the presents and ribbons.

Again, Adam's enchantment is akin to a child encountering a puppy or a kitten for the first time. What a wonderful world! What a miracle and delight a puppy is in the eyes of a child.

But Adam is a grown man, and Eve is not a Christmas tree or puppy, but a grown, noble woman. Indeed, I cannot help but think of Adam as wiser and better than any man we have ever known, for he had lived without sin and communed with God. This was a man of full stature, entirely charmed by this woman he sees for the first time.

For, in his wisdom, Adam now sees that he had been incomplete before. He now judges that he had not been capable of running this world by himself, that he needed the woman and her gifts. He needed her emotions, her words, her beauty, her strength, her capacity to mother and nurture this world.

And though it can be no more than pious speculation, we can imagine a cry of delight from Eve when she beholds Adam for the first time. He is different from her, yet I like to think that he was beautiful in her eyes too.

In fact, today's Psalm is the perfect one for helping us phrase the delight that Adam and Eve took in each other. Together, they are quite a team! Together, they are "man." I do not mean "man" in the meager sense of male, but "man" in its Biblical sense, with its plenitude of meaning:

So God created *man* in his own image, in the image of God he created him; *male and female* he created them. (Genesis 1:27, RSV)

And so, I like to imagine Adam gazing at Eve, star struck, and Eve gazing at him in return, and both of them singing about the nobility they see:

³When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; ⁴what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? ⁵Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. (Psalm 8:3-5, RSV)

Many a man has stood at the altar, gazed at his bride, astonished by her nobility and hardly believing that he is permitted to marry her. Many a woman has gazed at her man with equal love and counted herself blessed. And let us be pleased to think that those initial apprehensions were the truest of all! We might have forgotten for a while what a wonder, what a miracle, our beloved is and how blessed we are to be married to that one. And if we have forgotten for a while, let us set aside the familiarity of the years and try to grasp again that the day we married, God granted to us a miracle and our chief blessing on earth. For God granted to us a *human being*, part of the very pinnacle of his creation.

The reason I am so taken with the approach of Jesus concerning marriage and divorce is that *our salvation* depend on *his notion* of married love. Our eternity depends on him and the nature of his love for us. And the Bible is convinced that Jesus loves us as a faithful husband. I speak of what the Eastern Orthodox call “the mystical union between Christ and the Church.” It is a central teaching of the New Testament and a central teaching of Martin Luther.

In the New Testament, we can hear this exhortation to husbands to love their wives in such a way as to reflect Christ’s love for the Church:

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³²This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; (Ephesians 5:25-32, RSV)

Likewise, for Martin Luther, our eternal hope is based on the blessed exchange in which Christ gives us his righteousness and innocence and gladly accepts in return our sins, along with the punishment we would have been due for those sins, but which he is willing to bear for us in our place:

The third incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph. 5:31–32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage—indeed the most perfect of all marriages, since human marriages are but poor examples of this one true marriage—it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own. Let us compare these and we shall see inestimable benefits. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers? (*The Freedom of a Christian*, 1520)

Whatever can be said about marriage and divorce, at least this much is true: Jesus has gazed upon you and upon me and found himself entirely enchanted by us. Though we are sinners and too much unlike him, he loves us nonetheless. Indeed, Holy Baptism is that solemn moment in our lives when Christ gazes upon you and me and loses his heart to us and says so, for now and forevermore. This is our hope in this world, and this is our model of how we should love our husbands and wives.

Let us recall the blessing that our spouse represents for us. Let us love, forgive, forbear, be patient, and cherish our beloved as you and I are cherished by Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

Now it is our joy to turn again to such a mystical union, for our liturgy continues now with the baptism of Cassandra Lee Tice and her little daughter, Layla.