

XVIII Pentecost (22b)

Mk 2.2-9

4 October 2009

Fr. Patrick Allen

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When I worked at Camp St. Christopher, one of the college students who worked for us would often ask me about something he wanted to do, usually relating to some scheme he had hatched, by prefacing his question with the phrase, "Would it be bad if...?" Well, you knew right away, whatever came next, he was going to be sailing pretty close to the wind.

A group of Pharisees ask Jesus a question: "Is it *lawful* for a man to divorce his wife?" *Would it be bad if...?* And so Jesus asks a question in return, "What did Moses command you?" To which they reply, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to put her away."

Working our way through St. Mark's Gospel, we come this morning to our Lord's teaching on marriage – at least some of it. For the benefit, I suppose, of preachers like me, the Prayer Book lectionary leaves out the next three verses, which include Jesus' teaching on remarriage after divorce. Which, taken together with what Deacon Michael has just read for us, causes this passage often to be referred to as one of Jesus' "hard sayings." Not because it is mysterious or unclear or strange. Not at all. Jesus is limpid and plain to the point of being blunt. If it is a hard saying, it is so because it exposes so plainly the brokenness of our culture, of our church, of our own lives and hearts. And we are all, every one of us, touched by this brokenness – none of us is aloof or apart; indeed, we are all implicated.

In its practicalities, Jesus has this to say: Marriage is a lifetime bond between one man and one woman; divorce is contrary to God's will; remarriage after divorcing one's spouse is a point along the continuum of adultery.

We all know the statistics. Something approaching half of all marriages will end in divorce. If the tabloids in the checkout line at the Piggly Wiggly are to be believed, even Brad and Angelina are on the rocks.ⁱ And we know that, at least here in America, things with regard to marriage are not significantly different inside the Church than on the outside.

As I say, Jesus here reveals our brokenness. Another way to say that, of course, is that he exposes our deep need for God's mercy and forgiveness. By showing us God's law in its fullness and even – perhaps especially – in its beauty, Jesus shows us our need for rescue, for healing, for a Savior, for himself.

As we think about what that means for us, it might be helpful to have a bit of the background to this confrontation between Jesus and this group of Pharisees. Just prior to the point at which we began our lesson this morning, Mark tells his readers that Jesus and his disciples have now come down into Judea, south from Galilee, where he had been teaching and healing the sick. That's not just a random geographic note from St. Mark. It's significant to the story he telling, significant because it means that Jesus has now re-entered the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas. Which itself is significant because, as it happened, Antipas had recently divorced his wife in order to marry a woman named Herodias, who was actually the wife of his brother. As you may recall, John the Baptist exercised his prophetic office by loudly and publicly denouncing this scandalous union, and, as you may also recall, he paid for it with his head.ⁱⁱ

That's what is behind Mark's introduction to this dialogue – *Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife?* They were not interested in getting Jesus' help in settling a

controverted question of the law, much less in clarifying God's will and intention for marriage for better pastoral application in their local synagogue. They were actually interested in getting Jesus to align himself publicly with John and thus put himself afoul of Antipas and, more importantly, Herodias and her dancing daughter.

It's worth noting that there are other times in the Gospels when the Scribes and Pharisees or other opponents of Jesus ask questions attempting to bait him into some kind of religious and/or political trap. Questions about the resurrection and paying taxes to Caesar come to mind. And usually, Jesus smoothly avoids the trap, teaches an important truth, and leaves his opponents tied in knots.

But not here, not this time. Here, Jesus steps squarely and forthrightly into the trap.

And so we might ask, why? Why does Jesus knowingly step into this obvious trap? Perhaps – actually I think almost certainly – to show his solidarity with and to vindicate John.

But also, I think, because it's just too important a question not to deal with directly. These issues of marriage and divorce and human sexuality are not matters of mere social convention, but they go, as Jesus will show us, right to the heart of who we are as human beings created in the image and likeness of God. Which explains, by the way, why controversy in these matters so often turns so bitter so quickly. And for those with ears to hear, it explains why in approaching these matters we must be so careful, so gentle, so humble, so very aware of the planks in our own eyes.

“Is it *lawful* for a man to divorce his wife?” ask the Pharisees. *Would it be bad if...?* They are asking, in essence, “How much can we get away with? What is the least required of us?” And so Jesus asks his question in return, “What did Moses command you?” To which they reply, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to put her away.” *To put her away.*

Notice that Jesus asks for a positive command and they reply with a provision, a concession. But they have a point, even if they overstate it somewhat. They're referring to a passage in the book of Deuteronomy which dictated that if a man were to put away his wife (and it was always the man putting away his wife), he must give her a certificate of divorce so that she would be free to remarry and thus have some hope of avoiding almost certain poverty. There is nothing in the Torah that encourages, endorses, or even condones divorce, but there is this provision to mitigate the evil effects of an evil act.

Moses recognizes that divorce is happening and will happen, and he describes a right to which the wife is entitled for her protection. But you see what has happened: the camel's nose of human willfulness is in the tent; a provision is made permission is made the norm. *Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to put her away.*

The Pharisees begin with our sinfulness and ask what is the least required – *Would it be bad if...?* But not Jesus. Our Lord begins with God's intent and asks, “Who has God made us to be? What does God want from and *for* us? “For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment,” Jesus tells them, “but from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What God has joined together let not man put asunder.”

As the Prayer Book says, “The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation,” and Jesus is telling us that it is God's intent in creation that should govern our thinking about and understanding of marriage. God's creation of us his image bearers as male and female is resolved in unity through marriage.

“At last,” cries Adam in the world’s first poetry as he greets Eve, “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!” This is not an “other” with whom I have entered into a contract based on certain terms and conditions and terminable subject to those conditions. We are united, we are one flesh, our difference is resolved in unity.

And that resolution in unity, marriage in its beauty, becomes for us the picture of God’s indissoluble bond to his people Israel. It becomes for us “the sign of the mystery of the union betwixt Christ and his Church” – of his indissoluble, self-sacrificing, utterly committed, ever-faithful uniting of himself to you and me, so that we become “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh”: even the Church, the pure bride of Christ.

That is what marriage reveals to us, and, in its slow working over time, as lover and beloved give themselves to one another in sickness and in health, in weal and in woe, in comfort and companionship, in the raising of children, forbearing and forgiving, that is what it actually makes us.

I know what you’re thinking: *Easy for you to say, Fr. Allen, you’ve married the perfect woman!* And I have! But think of it from her side, poor thing. As Fr. Borrett said to me when Ashley and I met with him for pre-marital counseling, “You’re going to have to hope that she loves Jesus more than she loves you.”

Well, here’s hoping! But as St. John tells us, we love because he first loved us. And marital love, both in its ardor and its labor, gives us insight into his love, and teaches us to love. And here, even in our failures, we see our need for the Bridegroom’s faithful love. And he is faithful. He puts his foot into the trap to tell us. And he stretches out arms on the cross to show us. And he bursts forth from the tomb alive to prove to us that nothing in our histories, nothing in our lives, not even our deaths, is beyond the reach and power of his redeeming, healing love. And he invites us now to this Altar, to give us a foretaste of our difference perfectly resolved in unity, which is eternal life with him and the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit – the wedding supper of the Lamb.

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ⁱ After Mass I was informed that Mr. Pitt & Ms. Jolie are not actually married.

ⁱⁱ Mk 6.14-29