

[Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 128; Hebrews 2:9-11; Mark 10:2-16]

I'm sure we have all heard of Marriage Sunday – it usually takes place in February on the weekend closest to Valentine's Day. Legitimately married couples are asked during Mass to renew their vows or at least to receive a special blessing. Given today's readings, is it right to ask if today is "Divorce Sunday"?

I remember sitting in the pew once as a teen with my Aunt Dorothy, the only person in our family who had undergone the unspeakable sin of marrying a divorced man. She'd duck her head when the lector first extolled God's intentions for men and women in the Genesis story of the creation of Eve. Next, she'd suffer the psalmist's idea that she was a fruitful vine that had been plucked from the recesses of her husband's home, her children like withering olive plants uprooted from their father's influence. Finally, her face grew stiff and her lower lip trembled as she heard Jesus affirm the wisdom of the ancient teaching: "What God has joined together, no human being must separate." It was hard to sit in church on "Divorce Sunday," even if you didn't attempt to remarry. Of course, if you had, you probably wouldn't have been sitting in church at all.

The teaching of Scripture and, by extension, the Church, seemed to make no exceptions, and Jesus is remarkably, even uncharacteristically unyielding on this matter. So a lot of people in my aunt's situation stayed married, through danger and infidelities, or through coldness and sadness, till death brought relief.

These days, of course, divorce is all around us, seemingly as common as marriage itself. There seems to be a lot of very good reasons for some couples to divorce, another way of saying that there are perhaps very few reasons why people should even marry in the first place. For the most part, divorced people are now receiving a much more compassionate response from the Church than ever before. Pastoral services for troubled marriages, and ministries to those who have divorced are available in most dioceses. And when couples seeking marriage admit that they've had an earlier marriage or two that needs "fixing," the typical pastor is going to pull out the usual forms, not show them the door.

Admittedly, not every marriage that ends in divorce needed to go that route. Some have told me over the years that their marriage ended for reasons that later seemed ill-considered, or that the relationship was in better shape than either party appreciated at the time.

But because so many marriages clearly cannot be sustained, the problem seems to be on the other side of the wedding, the period in which two people choose their mates. What can we as a Church do to support and encourage that process?

We can start with the kids and the young people. Pre-Cana and marriage preparation sessions, for all their ideals, arrive too late in the game to try to inform Catholics what the Church expects of marriage. We can take opportunities like this Sunday, not to disparage those who divorce but to solicit testimonies of what makes a good marriage.

We can celebrate and support families who are doing the hard job of being a family particularly well. And let's not fail to get parents involved in delivering the messages, explicit and implicit, about what marriage is really all about. When young people regularly see how a good marriage works, they are far less likely to settle for less.

Good theology helps, too. In Hebrew tradition, they had the Old Testament books, plus commentaries on the books, plus commentaries on the commentaries! According to one commentary on today's First Reading from Genesis, God and Adam are having a conversation about a true helpmate. God says to Adam, "I will make you an ideal wife, but it will cost a part of your body. She will live to serve you. She will hang on your every word. She will prepare delicious meals three times a day, and keep the Garden of Eden clean and presentable." "That sounds wonderful!" says Adam. "How much of my body will it cost me?" God replied, "An arm and a leg." Adam says, "How much can I get for a rib?" And that's what Adam got!

In Hebrew mythology, **Adam** was the "person of earth," made from the dirt. Adam was a complete individual, not a gendered person, since gender implies polarity.

According to one rabbi, we can understand the story of Adam's rib as the rending of a complete person into two separate and interdependent halves. The word for rib means "side" in Hebrew. One side becomes the woman, leaving Adam one-sided as the man.

The original covenant of love was initiated by God. God made that covenant with our spiritual ancestors and commits to that covenant with each one of us today.

What are the actions I use to shore up my own commitments to the community I serve and the significant people in my life? How can I keep my own commitments life-enhancing? To what do I need to recommit so that God's love keeps flowing in my relationships with others and in my relationship with God?

When I was getting to know a married man who was coming to me for spiritual direction, I asked about his marital situation. This is what he said:

“I’ve been married dozens of times -- all to the same woman. In any relationship you have to keep committing and recommitting as times and circumstances change and you come to know more about your partner and yourself. And so a marriage is not a wedding day but a series of decisions to be for and with the other person “for better or for worse.”

He went on: “Sometimes the internal recommitment comes when you notice your attention drifting away to competing interests. Sometimes it comes after a fight. Sometimes it takes the form of **deciding** to fight to deal with all those resentments you’ve both been storing up. And sometimes you look across the dinner table and recognize the person you fell in love with long ago, and that memory re-energizes your life together.”

To you married couples out there, I, unmarried and childless, say: Through the years there will be plenty of opportunities to let your relationships wither and die. Yet the invitation is not just to endure but to access the love that once called you, to enter again into the dreams of your younger days, and to let your loving commitment blossom and grow in the midst of today’s reality --however difficult that might be. This is the ideal. We all fall short, giving us yet more opportunities to renew those commitments to the best of our ability.

The promise at the heart of marriage is the promise God makes to each of us: “Whenever it comes time to decide again, it’s a foregone conclusion that I will always and everywhere side with you.” AMEN!