

Twenty-seventh Sunday Cycle B October 7, 2018

It is a question concerning divorce that led Jesus to elucidate his teaching on marriage.

The Pharisees ask Jesus: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" The question was a trap! Jesus was travelling through Judea which was ruled by King Herod. King Herod had divorced his wife to marry Herodias, his brother's wife. Religious Jews wondered how Herod could be God's anointed king when he had flouted God's law in this way. If Jesus had said that it was unlawful to divorce one's wife, it might be seen as a pronouncement that Herod was unfit to be king. Jesus could suffer the same fate as John the Baptist. If Jesus had said that divorce was alright, he could then be accused of going against the Torah, of being no better than Herod.

Jesus' response is to ask a question of his own. He asks the scholars of the Mosaic Law: "What did Moses command you?" Moses allowed a man, they said, to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." The word "dismissal" is shocking to modern ears, but we need to remember that at that time married women were essentially the property of their husbands. Under Mosaic Law only a man could divorce his wife, not vice versa. The only consolation was that with a certificate of divorce the woman could marry someone else.

Moses allowed this because of your hardness of heart, Jesus tells them. It is not what God intended from the beginning. God's intention for marriage is the joining together of one man and one woman. Spouses joined together in marriage are no longer two, but one flesh. Jesus deepens, even radicalizes, the teaching found in Genesis. He says that it is God who joins them together in a bond never meant to be broken.

Sadly, marriages do break down, for different reasons. The ideal is not always achieved. The reality is all too painful, and often memories go unhealed. Even children suffer greatly. Jesus shows no readiness to make judgments or condemnations on the matter.

Jesus spoke these words while on his way to Jerusalem. One way of seeing Jesus' teaching on marriage is through the lens of his own vocation. He had been talking to his disciples about denying themselves and taking up their cross. He himself was preparing for the sacrifice of the cross. Marriage requires the willingness to make sacrifices. Love has a sacrificial character. Thinking and acting selfishly can destroy relationships. St. Paul who had once been a very ego-centered person, after his conversion wrote, "Love is not selfish." Marriage is a helping-each-other kind of life. Spouses need to be willing at times to lay aside their own desires to serve the other. It is not about me, but about helping the other become all he or she can become. So too, Jesus' mission was not about him. He gave himself for us, because he loved us.

The kind of fidelity required in marriage is not unlike the fidelity of Jesus to his mission. In his Gospel, St. Luke has Jesus speaking about taking up the cross daily. Fidelity in marriage is a commitment “till death do us part.” Attentiveness to one’s spouse, that willingness to listen, that being there for one another, that attentiveness to the small everyday things is what fidelity in marriage is all about. It is not just something sexual. It is about the union, not only of bodies, but of minds, hearts and spirits. Marriage is not just about remembering anniversaries; it is about being there for one another day in and day out.

It is God’s intention to be a partner in marriage. God desires to be a presence pervading the life of a couple, uniting them to himself and to one another in an ever deepening bond of friendship and love. If God is not in your marriage there is something missing. God loves you. Don’t shut him out. Seek him out. He turns no one away who comes to him. Like the couple at Cana long ago, invite Jesus to your wedding and into your life as a married couple. Do whatever he asks of you and miracles will quietly begin to happen.

The child is the supreme gift of marriage. The human child is tremendously vulnerable. Out on the farm, a calf is ready to run a few hours after birth. Twenty four hours later you won’t be able to catch it. A human child needs 6 months just to begin crawling. If God blesses you with children, they will need the security of a stable and loving marriage.

Today’s Gospel exhibits the openness and tenderness of Jesus in receiving little children whose parents bring them to him. It is so moving to hear how Jesus takes them up into his arms and blesses them. Jesus says, “Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” Why did he say that? Jesus knew that his teaching would not be easy to accept. We need the trusting heart of a child to receive it. We also need to welcome the child as we would welcome the Kingdom of God. Jesus wanted us to understand that marriage is more about vulnerability than it is about power. It is more helping each other than dominating the other.

Many people today struggle with relationships. It is not always easy to find the right person. Not all people are called to marriage. The single life can also be a vocation. But if you are thinking about marriage, pray and ask God to help you find that right person. I was present at a 50th wedding anniversary. While her husband sat in a wheelchair beside her, a woman told of how before marriage she had asked God for a good man, nothing more she asked for but a good man. And then she said, looking at her husband, “God answered my prayer. He gave me a good man.” Don’t forget to pray. God does answer prayers.

In a few moments we will receive Holy Communion. He who is the Bridegroom of our souls will come to us. We will become one with him. The union we have with Jesus is not unlike the union of a husband and wife. We too are one body in Christ, united in a mystical union with

him who is “the Lover of our souls.” Christ too has one spouse; his Bride is the Church. This is why Jesus preferred to talk about marriage rather than divorce. He wanted to talk about what unites us, not what divides us. He wanted us to think about our oneness in him. He was thinking of marriage as a sacramental reality that has the power to make present and render visible in the world his love for his bride, the Church. He wanted his love to penetrate the hardest of hearts.

Father Neil