

[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!

[Wisdom 7:7-11; Psalm 90; Hebrews 4:12-13; Mark 10:17-27]

The great English writer and convert to Catholicism, Gilbert K. Chesterton, once wrote: “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting or lacking; it has been found difficult and not tried.” We can certainly agree to this, if Chesterton meant that worldwide Christianity has not been tried as a basis on which to motivate our personal lives, to set national policies, or to shape international relationships. Today’s readings say, “Let Wisdom be your guide. Let God’s Word be your guide. Let Jesus Christ be your guide.”

Remember the economic crash ten years ago in 2008? People who had lost their jobs, who had run out of their unemployment benefits or who had to downsize their living arrangements shared with me at that time these words of wisdom: “You learn real fast what you can live without... all the ‘stuff’ that I thought I could never live without. Now I can. Because now I have to.” Lessons learned the hard way. This is the dilemma facing the rich young man. He lived a virtuous life. He kept all the commandments. He followed all the rules and regulations of his faith, his religion. But Jesus looks at him, with great love in His eyes and in His heart, and tells him the one thing – the one last thing – he needs to do to find lasting peace and complete joy.

For those who are unsure, the Catholic position in a nutshell is this: Poverty is not a virtue, nor is wealth inherently sinful. Success can obviously be measured in a lot of ways, but if it happens to include a nice fat paycheck, that’s OK, too, as long as it is earned ethically. The real measure of our wealth, of course, is the treasure we’ve stored up in heaven, which makes whatever we have or don’t have here ironically immaterial. The best kind of riches to bank on, according to Scripture, is wisdom of the ways of God. If we’ve got that, our relative worth in dollars and cents won’t impede our spiritual progress.

Riches are nothing compared to Wisdom. It is not money that is the root of all evil. It is the LOVE of money that is the root of all evil. The Word of God is a two-edged sword cutting us from those things, those people and those situations that keep us from knowing and loving and serving God completely.

The bottom line is: It's not *what* we have, it's *how* we have it that matters in the doorway of the Kingdom. Can we let our wealth go when it is required of us -- and by wealth, I mean our stuff, our advantage, the esteem others have for us, our relationships, our health, and even our lives? Is there anything we've got in our fists that's clutching us back so tightly that we are afraid to let it go? Following Jesus is a lifestyle that is only available to people who are truly free. If there's a prior claim on our hearts, we've still got some divesting to do.

Whether you are among the wealthier members of this parish or among the poorest, whether you still have a job or are just hanging on by the skin of your teeth, whether you have a spouse or are a single parent, today's readings are meant for each one of you. What are you doing with who you are, what you are, and what you have to give thanks and praise to God? That's what it boils down to: the "S" – Word – Stewardship. Stewardship is what I do with what I have when I believe totally in God. It is taking what blessings we have and using if for God's work, not ours. Most of us generously give God 60% or 70% or even 80% or 90% of who we are, what we are, and what we have. Even if we give 99%, God still wants that 1%. God wants all aspects of our lives dedicated to God.

My friends, I think Jesus is asking for all of who you are, all of what you are and all of what you have. What will be YOUR response? Will your face fall? Will you leave here sad? Or are you ready to take the plunge? God wants to be in every single aspect of our lives. Nothing should be closed off or held tight.

One of my favorite prayers is this one from St. Ignatius Loyola. It goes like this: "Take Lord, receive all my liberty. My memory, understanding, my entire will. Take Lord, receive, all I have and possess. You have given all to me; now I return it. Take, Lord, receive, all is Yours now. Dispose of it, wholly according to Your Will. Give me only Your love and Your grace. That's enough for me." "YES, Lord, all is Yours now. Give me only Your Love and Your Grace." AMEN!

[Readings: Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126; Hebrews 5:1-6; Mark 10:46-52]

Do you remember learning the Five Senses when you were in grade school? Hearing, seeing, smelling tasting and feeling. To lose any of our senses would be terrible. I think the worst sense to lose for me, would be the sense of sight. I am a very visual person. I like to look at things that delight the eyes. Certainly, looking at the sun shining through the autumn leaves in Michigan can leave us breathless at times.

Mark in today's Gospel, gives us the second story of a blind man healed of his blindness. The first miracle happens as Jesus leaves Jerusalem and begins his public ministry. Today's miracle happens as Jesus ends his three years of preaching, teaching and healing and He heads back home for what awaits Him.

Mark deliberately places these two miracles at the beginning and at the end of the public life of Jesus for a reason. He wants us to "see" and understand his Gospel message. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks. "Master, I want to see." This is the simplest yet most profound request you or I or Bartimaeus can ask. "I want to see." I want to see not only with the eyes of my head, but with the eyes of my mind, with the eyes of my heart, with the eyes of my soul. I want to understand. I want to believe.

Isn't this what you and I hope to achieve in our lifetimes? The wisdom, the knowledge, the understanding of life and how to handle its problems and its blessings? To find my own identity, to know who I am and what God expects of me. This request is easy to make, and much more difficult to accept when Jesus gives us the profound answer: "Go on your way; your faith has saved you." It can also be translated, "Your faith has healed you." Which is easier to receive, healing or salvation?

This weekend is World Youth Day. The day that the universal Church, the Church throughout the world, celebrates the younger members of our faith community. Did you know that when the late, great Pope John Paul II established the first World Youth Day, his target audience was not children aged 13 to 18, but young adults aged 18 to 35? Anyone younger than 18 is considered a child. A child with the potential of becoming a young adult.

We often say that the young have their whole lives ahead of them. So does Bartimaeus. We don't know how young or how old he is, but he still speaks for all of us, especially our young people.

He asks for something much deeper than mere physical eyesight. We can imagine him saying, "Lord Jesus, give me sight. Let me see again. Let me see the way in front of me.

Heal me of whatever it is that is keeping me from seeing." This is what Jesus "sees" in the man's heart, in his very soul. This is what Jesus "sees" when He looks you and me right in the eye when He asks, "What do you want me to do for YOU?" What DO you want Jesus to do for you today? Take a silent moment to think about that... Now imagine one of the crowd saying to you today, "Take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you." What cloaks of encumbrance do we need to shed? What is keeping us from "springing up" to come to Jesus today?

Jeremiah, our prophet from today's First Reading, knew first-hand how it was to follow the Lord, and what it would cost him. He would be mocked, threatened and assaulted by those who wished to silence him and the truth he preached. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us of what priests must go through each day "beset" with our own weakness, struggles and sin.

And when St. Mark tells us that immediately Bartimaeus receives his sight and follows Jesus "on the way," he reminds us that it is not going to be like dancing along the Yellow Brick Road. Jesus is "on the way" to Jerusalem. This means that Jesus is on his way to His suffering and imprisonment, His torture and His execution, His death and His Glorious Resurrection.

I would like to close with a special message for the young people here today. If you are 35 years old or younger, this is for you. Young people: Bartimaeus begins his journey on the side of the road and in the darkness. Instead of telling Jesus that he wants a place of honor, as John and James did last week; after he is healed and saved, Bartimaeus silently follows Jesus "on the way." On the way of Jesus, not another way.

Jesus is calling each one of YOU to see, to understand and to follow Him. In the busy-ness of your lives, don't become blind to the messes that begin to take over your lives.

In the many demands made on your time, your talent, your energy, look for, find and “see” the possibilities for doing good and for affirming yourself and one another.

Be counter-cultural. When your peers are slaves of self-absorption, self-centeredness and selfish desires, remember that Jesus Christ has given you a new spiritual insight to recognize Him, to fall in love with Him, and to follow Him “on the way” which He has marked out especially for you alone. Take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you! You may be seated. For now!

And a final message for all of us: There is so much that we are blind to in our lives, isn't there? We don't see the few pounds we've added until the pants don't button any more. We don't see the graying hairs and wrinkles until the waitress innocently asks us if we want the senior discount. We don't see the pain and hurt we cause until someone finally breaks down in tears.

What is sad is when everyone else around us sees what WE can't. How pathetic a 50-year-old looks dressing and acting like a teenager. How frustrating when an employer fails to see the worker who is destroying the rest of the team.

What makes the blind person so heroic in the Gospel today was his courage. He sprang up and without hesitation asked for the sight that will change his life beyond his imagination. He was not afraid to ask for it.

What are we afraid of? Why are we unwilling to ask to see things more clearly in our lives? What relationship needs to be reformed? What personal issue or concern needs to be confronted? What will change our lives dramatically if we are only able to see through it more clearly?

It is time to ask God for the sight we need to be the best person, the best version of ourselves we can be. God wants to help us and waits patiently for us only to ask. AMEN!