

October 4, 2009

The scripture lessons we hear each Sunday are listed in the Revised Common Lectionary. The Revised Common Lectionary is an ecumenical lectionary with texts selected by the Consultation on Common Texts, a group with representatives from 16 protestant denominations and Roman Catholic Church. The Consultation which is thought to know just what parts of the Holy Scriptures it's important for us to hear have put together a listing of what Gospel and what Old Testament lesson and what Psalm and what New Testament lesson we should hear on each Sunday of the year. In addition to that, the readings are organized into three church years—in Year A we hear mostly from Matthew's gospel; in Year B, which is the year we're in now, we hear from Mark and in Year C, which starts on the first Sunday in Advent, we'll hear mostly from Luke. This Revised Common Lectionary is used by many Christian churches throughout the world, including our own Episcopal and ELCA Lutheran traditions. Just think, the lessons we heard this morning are also being heard this morning in Boston and Ft. Lauderdale and Seattle and San Francisco.

Sometimes the lessons listed are easy to work with. I just love it when I get to preach and go to the lessons and find that I get to talk about Jesus changing water into wine, or feeding the 5000, or one

of those terrific healing mysteries. And then there are other times—like this morning when we hear Jesus come down really heavy on divorce. I'll bet there's not a person in this room whose life hasn't been touched in some way by divorce. It might be your own divorce or that of your parents, or one of your children, or a sister or brother or close friend. I've been thinking about divorce a lot recently because I've learned that a couple with whom I did pre-marital counseling, and at whose marriage I officiated, are now, after four years, getting a divorce. Somehow Jesus saying that a man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her and a woman who divorces her husband and marries another commits adultery doesn't fit with my image of a loving God who is always ready to love us and forgive us. So, let's look at this a little further.

Remember the central pronouncement of God in the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis, which is just a little different from the story we heard this morning from the second chapter of Genesis? Throughout the first chapter God has said one thing about His creation, over and over: "God saw that it was good."

But now God looks at all he has made, everything, and says, “It is not good.” It is not good that the man (and here “man” means, not a male person, but a human being) should be alone.

Think about that. Really listen to that. Everything else is good, but this isn't. Notice also that Adam, the human being, was hardly alone in the garden. First of all, God was with Adam in the garden. That's a lot all by itself. Then, when the animals were done, all of nature, all of creation, was with Adam in the garden. The whole world was there. The human being was not alone. But when God saw it, when God saw one person, God didn't say “look what I've created, it doesn't get any better than this.” Instead, God said, about this and only about this: “It is not good.”

Creation wasn't finished yet. As long as the man lived in isolation from other people, the creation of a good, a complete, human being, had not yet happened. It was in order to complete creation, to make the whole human being, that the other person, Eve, is created.

There are a couple of things to notice here. First of all, the story isn't as much about the roles of men and women as it is about what it means to be a human being. Also, it is not saying that everyone should be married or that only married people are whole people.

That's just not true. After all, as far as we know, Jesus, the perfect image of God, was single. But this is saying that we human beings can only grow into who we are created to be with and through another or others—through relationship and through community. This growth happens in many ways, but it does not happen alone. We do not become whole or complete in isolation, but through community, through the “other.”

And it is to this end that God has given us certain structures and so many situations in which we can, maybe, begin to discover what it means not to be alone. We need only look around us.

For some of us, it is in marriage, for others it is in committed relationships. For some a religious order. For others it is in friends or extended family or in reaching out beyond ourselves to help others: working at Delonis Shelter, Angel Food Ministries, growing a garden and giving away the food, smiling at someone having a hard day. Imagine all the opportunities that God has placed before us to reach beyond our own isolation. God has given us schools of love, places to grow

In much the same way, God has called us to be the church. And God has called us into this church, to open our arms and embrace each other and the wider world. Not because it is easy, because being part of a relationship, either one-on-one or communally, is

not always easy--it can be down right difficult--but because of the rewards it brings.

One of the central insights of Christianity is that being a part of a real, human, piece of the body of Christ is essential to any serious Christian growth. Like marriage and family, parish life, church life is not really about agreement, success, having our needs met, or happiness. Instead church life is one of those schools of love. It is about growth into wholeness.

When we enter into a marriage or into a committed relationship with another person we make vows. In much the same way, we, or other speaking for us, made vows at baptism. These vows include a commitment, to a spouse or to a committed partner or to a Christian community, and that commitment is for the long haul. It's not a commitment to be made lightly but a commitment for better or for worse.

Sure, there are times when that just doesn't happen. There are sometimes situations in which separation is the only option that contains hope and the possibility of healing. We have all known that to happen—whether in a divorce or maybe when people leave churches and find new ones.

And the pain and tragedy of divorce—and the fact that it brings very real possibilities of destruction of a relationship and new hope—is, in one form or another, a part of the lives of every one of us. If it hasn't happened to us personally, we have been affected by it. These failures of relationships are devastating, and those who hurt need our love, our compassion and our support.

All this is really to say that, at the heart of it, marriage is not a convenient human institution for protecting property and inheritance, for regulating sexuality, and for safeguarding children. And, at the heart of it, the Church is not a voluntary social convenience for like-minded people to share in an essentially private task.

While they may sometimes be ordinary and not too glamorous, marriage and committed relationships and being part of the faith community and a church family are vastly more than this. They are sacred stuff. They are built into creation and into human nature. They are schools of love and they are gifts from a loving God. It is not good to be alone; and the only way to goodness, to wholeness is through commitment and through relationship and through community. And we get all of this as a gift—from the grace of God. And then God can say, “it is very, very good.”

May it ever be so. And may we all say together, AMEN.