

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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All Saints' Episcopal Church, San Diego, CA

Goat-heads not intended, Sermon for Proper 22B (1979 BCP)

Genesis 2:18-24; Hebrews 2:1-18; Mark 10:2-9

With credit to the Rev. Charles Hoffacker for his pastoral approach to this subject

Today's lessons give us the opportunity to walk together through the green, green grass of home - barefoot, while stepping on lots of sharp sticker plants, as we still look for the great treasure of Good News that awaits us there.

Lord, let your word only be spoken, and your word only be heard. Amen.

Today's gospel, especially, catches our attention because it addresses marriage and divorce in a way that's unavoidable. Many preachers would like to bypass these appointed lessons altogether, just preach on the beauty and dreams of marriage only at weddings, and not have to talk about divorce at all. And who can blame them? Up where my home is in the San Joaquin valley, we have sticker plants hiding in the grass. Unless you have a professional lawn company servicing your lawns to make that green grass that is the envy of your entire neighborhood, you are almost guaranteed to have hiding just at soil level these sticker weeds. They grow and spread, and then they take over the grass itself. But even before that happens, these weeds produce seeds or heads that have little thorns on them. And when they dry out, these heads become incredibly hard, and very sharp. We call them goat-heads. They stick into the bottom of your shoes or flip flops, they get into and onto pets, like when your dog is rolling around in the grass, and then they come inside your house. There's nothing like it....walking out into the cool green grass with your shoes off and then the air is pierced with your scream as you step on a cluster of these.

You get the picture.

Preaching about divorce and marriage is like running barefoot through a field of goat-heads.

Why? Because any contemporary congregation is likely to contain people who are married, people who are divorced, people who are divorced and remarried, people who may get divorced at some time in the future, people who have been treated dismissively by churches due to their marital difficulties, peoples whose lives and families and friends have been hurt by the pain of divorce. You can be sitting in the pew having been married for 60 years, and there will be an uncomfortable shifting, because it's everybody's issue, indirectly or directly.

This was somewhat illustrated by where the property of my former parish was situated. When I got to Tulare in 1989 I noted the crossroads: one street was named Laspina, and the other Prosperity. When I looked up the meaning of what I figured was Spanish for Las Pinas, the pine cones, I found, rather, that it came from the Italian word for "thorn." In other words, the church was at the corner of Thorn and Prosperity. We could not hide from it. It was life's hopes and realities all in one intersection.

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Still. It is not fair to the teaching of Jesus, and thus it is not fair to what we are supposed to learn from God's word, if we avoid the intersection, if you will, if we avoid the scene of the Gospel today, the context, the word, the teaching spoken not only to the whole of God's People, but also the word of God spoken directly into each one of us. So, even though preaching about marriage and divorce looks like running through a field of thorny goat-heads, and listening to a sermon on marriage and divorce can, no doubt, seem the same way: one wrong step into the unsuspecting lives of people, and we just add to the hurting, let us venture anyway together carefully into the goat-head laden green grass, in the hope that amid the thorns we can find together what sermons are supposed to reveal: good news for a world that's broken and in pain.

The discussion gets started because some of the Pharisees are out to get Jesus. They want to trap him in his words and so destroy his Messiah credibility. The issue they raise in this scene for that purpose is a controversial one at that time: whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Authorities differ on this question. Some allow divorce only in instances of adultery. Others allow divorce for the slightest of reasons. But note how the issue is framed: Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? In our modern ear we are distracted hearing sexism and inequality: what about a wife divorcing her husband? But that contemporary criticism is really beside the point here, do you see? It's all about the trap, not about the solution. Framed as it is, they've made a personal opinion question. Jesus is not fooled either. Jesus knows this question is not an honest inquiry. These Pharisees are not interested in his opinion, but in testing him, defeating him. These Pharisees on this day were attempting an arrogant attempt at problem solving; and it was consistently rampant during this time in Israel. Look at Saul – we know him as Paul after his conversion– gaining letters from the Sanhedrin after the stoning of Stephen to bring Jews back to Jerusalem from Damascus who had come to believers in Jesus. There, in chains, they would stand trial, and punishment for blasphemy. It's beyond our civil comprehension. Frankly, though, look around the world today, and our comprehension of such abuse should be shocked even today. Jesus' crucifixion is the same abuse. And these hardheads are not about Socratic moments of education. They are about trapping and getting rid of the pest.

This is not the first time, nor the last, for this strategy. Making use of what they know and what they can get away with. On this particular day we are hearing of standards of the Jewish law for Men and women, marriage and divorce. We will hear of the Beginnings of it, and what they are told it was supposed to be as God intended. So let's look in and see what happens.

Jesus responds to the question with his own question: "What did Moses command you?" The purpose of the reply question is to expand the question, find the parameters of the questioner. In this case, in other words, instead of accepting the question as a "he said, she said" kind of thing, of personal or private opinion, Jesus asks back "You mean the foundations of it all? How does the Law of Moses read, the law you hold in such high regard?" Jesus knows the answer, of course, and so does everyone within hearing distance. It's what is called today a no-brainer. And so the Pharisees shoot back the correct reference: Moses allows a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.

The reference here is to Deuteronomy, Chapter 24. To say the least, it is unlikely that Moses is simply giving permission to divorce. What Moses does instead is to recognize that divorce happens and to set forth norms regarding certain types of remarriage. Like the canon law of the

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Episcopal Church, Moses acknowledges that divorce happens here in this world outside the Garden of Eden. The acknowledgment found in Deuteronomy is turned by these particular Pharisees into permission for divorce.

These Pharisees get the reference right, but get the spirit wrong. And Jesus lays into them. Allow me to paraphrase Jesus' words, "So you give that Deuteronomy passage as permission for divorce, with its demand that the paperwork be in order? Moses would never have written that except for divorce happening anyway, except for the hardness of the human heart in this world outside Eden!" Talk about bible thumpers, if Jesus had had the scroll of Genesis or Exodus or Deuteronomy in his hand, he would have been pounding it in his hand. It is as though he thumps a finger against the sternum of each of those Pharisees and says: "Don't you get it? Your hearts are hard! If human hearts were not hard, then marriages would always work, as intended by God, and Moses wouldn't have written about what happens when they don't!"

So that's it. The Pharisees will retreat, and this particular difficult moment is over. Here, though, is something we see each time this happens beyond the confrontations themselves: first, those there and now have learned some incredibly profound characteristics of the topic that was used to trap Jesus, in this case about God's will and intent for marriage itself, and thus divorce; and second, we find Jesus speaking to us now and saying much of the same things as to those who confronted Jesus. He addresses each one of us and in this case says: "Don't you get it? Your hearts are hard!" We search the scriptures attempting to find the answers that make our lives more comfortable, leaving unabsorbed the difficult but eventually life-giving answers from Jesus.

So, as Jesus in this case speaks to the teaching, but also to how we approach ANY issue, please note this, and note it well. He's not just challenging the divorced among us. Or them, back then. He's challenging every last one of us, even if we have been married happily for six decades, or never married at all. The divorced are not to be regarded as some pariah class different from the rest of us. The problem of the hard heart is not limited to divorced people, but is common to us all. In some it becomes evidenced in a marital break-up. In others it shows itself in a marriage that remains together but is lifeless. In still others, hardness of heart appears in a failure to forgive our friends, in a judgmental spirit toward our children or parents, or any of the other forms of sin in which we humans become trapped. The divorced are not worse and not better than the rest of us. We all find ourselves in the same place: outside the gates of Eden. But then Jesus stops talking about hard hearts. Instead, he takes us by both hands and looks at us with an expression of compassion, hope and remembrance. He calls us back to a time before time, back to when our home was the Garden, back to the intention of God at creation. The green, green grass of home without the goat-heads of life.

We read in Genesis that the woman was made from the man's rib. It's said in Jewish tradition that the reason for this peculiar procedure is that woman and man might be intimate and equal. Woman was not made from man's head, so that she should be superior, nor from his feet, that she should be inferior, but rather from a bone near his center, near his heart, that the two might be equal and intimate. And this sense of respect for the presence and dignity of every human being follows.

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Yes, of course, there are some marriages that are dead from the start, and others that die along the way by adultery. And there are spouses who have the right to escape what has become of their marriage when their safety or sanity is threatened by unrelenting abusive behavior. But in other cases, divorce happens because people see marriage like those opponents of Jesus did: as a power relationship, as a problem that divorce can solve, where an insane consumer culture leads people to treat as disposable not only houses and cars, but also spouses and families.

That's not it! If nothing else, Jesus will not allow Marriage to become a problem to be solved. It is a mystery to be lived. It is a sacrament to be cherished. It is not a business deal subject to a cost-benefit analysis. It is a means by which two people, having made intentional life-long vows in both sickness and health, can participate in the kingdom of God – and do so in the comfort of their own home!

The Genesis story of mutual help in life does not mean to imply that our only option is marriage. If you are married, though, God has given you your spouse so that together you can taste in your human way something of the joy of the marriage between God and creation, Christ and the church, the Lamb and his bride. Marriage is intended as a road to heaven; not a problem, but a holy mystery; not a mere happiness, but a divine joy. This is how Jesus answers the Pharisees who intended to trap him. Tragically, they won't hear the wisdom and the divine answer. In the end, God calls all his children home, whether married or unmarried, to the wedding feast where, by the Spirit's power, we will find ourselves united with Christ forever.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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