Homily for 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B, 7 Oct 2018

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A typical four-year-old girl was having difficulty grasping the concept of marriage, her father decided to pull out his wedding photo album, thinking visual images would help. One page after another, he pointed out the bride arriving at the church, the entrance, the wedding ceremony, the recessional, the reception, etc. “Now do you understand?” he asked. “I think so,” she said, “is that when mommy came to work for us?”

It seems today many Catholics, like this little girl, have a lot of questions about marriage. Topping the list are the questions, “Why doesn’t the Church believe in divorce, and why do I have to get an annulment before I remarry?” Just looking at the statistics, it seems people in the Church aren’t satisfied with the answers they are getting. The number of marriages celebrated in the Catholic Church has fallen nearly 65 percent since 1972 even though the number of Catholics increased by 17 million during this same period. And many Catholics are choosing to marry outside of the Church, and an increasing number of young adults are deciding not to marry at all.

But I have a feeling that if people today came at Jesus with all these different questions and issues, he would respond today much like he did in today’s Gospel. Jesus doesn’t respond to the Pharisees question about marriage and divorce by jumping right into a legalistic dispute or a complex explanation of dogmatic statements. He reframes the issue by pointing out God’s intention “From the beginning of creation,” when “God made them male and female.” (Mk 10:6) Jesus is taking us back to our first reading, so let’s follow his lead and go find God’s plan for marriage in Genesis Ch 2.

First, we hear God say, “It is not good for the man to be alone.” (Gn 2:18) In one simple sentence we see God portrayed in imminent terms. God is concerned for our wellbeing, and showered gifts on Adam: lush gardens, the beautiful streams, the varieties of animals. But despite the beauty of these gifts, Adam felt alone. So out of a single-minded concern for what is good for him, God creates Eve as the companion Adam needed. And then we hear Adam say something profound – “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” (Gn 2:23) And Jesus repeats what we read in Genesis, that in marriage the spouses become “one flesh.” (Mk 10:8) Flesh, as it is used here, means more than physical union, but a total union, body and spirit, the total and free gift of two persons, each to the other. Now we might not get this right off, but in the Old Testament that’s covenant language. And covenant language is the language of marriage as it was meant to be in the beginning.

This story from Genesis establishes first the common humanity of man and woman as equals, then shows that they were intended for each other because they complete each other. Neither is whole without the other. Covenant marriage is the permanent and total exchange of persons in God’s name for the creation of families and communities. And why did God create marriage this way? Because he wants what’s good for us. He wants to shower us with the many wonderful gifts that marriage brings.
Using today’s language, we would say God create marriage as a Sacrament, an essential part of God’s plan for human salvation; a Sacrament through which grace flows into the world through marital unions. The love of Christ working through the holy spirit perfects and strengthens the couples’ bond of love and helps them with the responsibilities and many challenges of married life, especially raising children. It seems God uses good and faithful marriages as a living sign of a good and faithful God.

By quoting from Genesis, Jesus affirms God’s original plan for marriage, that marriage is a state of life created by God for the good of humanity, not a mere human ordinance that can be abolished or altered at will. God joins a husband and wife together in a permanent covenant relationship, and no Human should separate them. And this is the source of Jesus’ prohibition of divorce in our Gospel reading today.

Yet, as Jesus knows, we still have a lot of hardened hearts in this broken world, and the evil this causes much too often weakens and destroys relationships, including marital unions. For those who find themselves in separation, divorce, or broken marriages, far too often our Church just holds up the ideal state envisioned for all marriages, says take it or leave it, and then walk away. Too often the people doing this are wearing a Roman Collar And this is simply not good enough. This is judgmental, hurtful, and pushes people away from the Church. As we hear from John’s Gospel, at the center of the Gospel is that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn anyone, but that ALL might be saved through him. (John 3:17)

To take this a little further, let’s look now at some context within which Jesus prohibits divorce. Jesus and the Pharisees knew what the law of Moses said, “when a man, after marrying a woman, is later displeased with her because he finds in her something indecent he writes out a bill of divorce and hands it to her, thus dismissing her from his house.” (Deut 24:1-4). But what was meaning of the phrase “something indecent”? What were the legitimate grounds for divorce under Jewish law? That was the ongoing debate in Jesus’ day. And some Jewish leaders wanted to make it as easy as possible for a man to end a marriage and had included reasons as frivolous as poor cooking as a reason for divorce.

Understood in this context, Jesus' prohibition of divorce should be heard not as condemnation, but as a defense of the innocent women who suffered under “hard-hearted” Jewish divorce law. Women rarely owned property and had no independent means of living. Without a husband they were the most vulnerable members of society next to children. So, Jesus prohibits divorce to protect the weak and vulnerable. He is not judging or condemning divorced persons, but his words against divorce are words of compassion.

Yes, Jesus clearly prohibited divorce; it’s one of the most widely attested teachings of Jesus in the New Testament, found in Matthew (19:3-9, 5:31-32), Mark (10:1-14), Luke (16:18) and Paul (1 Cor 7:10-11). But Jesus is also our compassionate and merciful high priest who calls us to love the broken and protect the innocent. It is one of our Church’s greatest pastoral challenge to be faithful to both of these values. We must both hold firm to the ideal of marriage that Jesus calls for, and care tenderly for those wounded by broken marriages.
And there is no easy recipe for our pastoral response, but I know it starts with us. We must soften our hearts so that we can help heal the wounds caused by those whose hearts are hardened. It starts by acknowledging that there are good and holy people in our parish who are suffering in their marriages. They may still be married, they may be separated, or divorced. They may be living alone, going through the annulment process or have remarried. And many of them are innocent victims of another’s hardened heart. Regardless of their current circumstances, they are suffering and hurting, and that’s not right! So, we must never reject, ignore or condemn; rather, we must always welcome, include, and stand ready to pour out the balm of God’s mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart.²

Certainly, we could go on for hours on this topic, but not today. So how do we wrap this up? First, let me call out to all the married couples here today. And my call is: today more than ever, your Church needs you! We need the example of your marriages as a mystery of self-giving love. We need you to give witness to the presence of God in your marriage. Even if you were not married in the church, we need your witness too. I invite you to consider entering a sacramental marriage to more fully receive God’s grace in your marriage and become an even brighter beacon of light for the world.

And my second call out is to those wounded by a failed or failing marriage. And my call is this: take comfort in knowing that we want you here, you are our brothers and sisters in the Church, and the church of God in Powhatan welcomes you as a mother welcomes her children. Now, and always, you belong here. We need you, too!

¹ Christians Unite, Clean Jokes; http://jokes.christiansunite.com/Marriage/Explaining_Marriage.shtml
² For more on this teaching see Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, The Joy of Love, 241-252 and 291-312.