**October 4, 2015 – 19th Sunday after Pentecost**

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In preaching classes we were cautioned against revealing too much of the process of creating a sermon. But you know me well enough to know that I often ignore that caution and tell you how much fun or how much trouble a sermon was to write. This is one of the latter times. The passages we heard today, especially the reading from Genesis and the Gospel, have been called difficult to preach on, challenging, or even “texts of terror.” These are the days where I think strongly about hauling out an instructed Eucharist or maybe even a children’s’ sermon.

Nevertheless, to ignore what we heard today would be to try to ignore the elephant in the room, so let’s dive right in and talk about marriage and divorce. After all, Jesus did! Before we get into it, though, I feel obliged to remind us all that the Bible is not a history book and it’s not an instruction manual. Oh sure, there are commandments to follow, and there are historical stories that do correspond to actual historical events, but primarily, the Bible is the story of humankind’s relationship to and with God, and vice versa. So keep that in mind.

Starting with Mark’s Gospel, there are a couple of other things to also keep in mind, specifically about divorce. By Jewish law only a man could divorce his wife, not the other way around. In Deuteronomy 24, where this commandment is laid out, it says that a man may divorce his wife if he finds something objectionable about her. The two schools of Rabbinic thought were torn on this. One said that even ruining dinner was good enough cause for divorce, but the other said that it had to be only for some immoral behavior on the part of the wife. Immoral behavior on the part of the husband is not mentioned in the divorce clause.

But regardless of the reason a Jewish woman had little say in how or if her marriage ended, just as she had little say in getting married in the first place. Marriage was a business deal between the two families, or between her father and her husband to be. Love had nothing to do with it and neither did the woman’s feelings.

Another thing to remember is that a divorced woman had no family and therefore no status. If she was lucky, or perhaps if she had children, she would be taken in by her own family or origin again. But if she was not so fortunate, she would be reduced to begging, prostitution, or just plain starving to death. It wasn’t a fair system, and it’s a far cry from what we experience nowadays, even though divorce can certainly cause plenty of hardship even today.

And that is some of Jesus’ point here. He points out to the Pharisees that the commandment was given to the Israelites because of the hardness of their hearts, and as an alternative to something possibly even worse. But in reality, it’s not a good thing because it tears apart a relationship that God has joined together. It’s funny – a lot of people out there make a lot of noise about behaviors that Jesus never actually talked about, but not too many people protest and wave signs about things that he actually DID. Like this one.

But now let’s leave that aside for a minute and look at Genesis. Two verses of Genesis have sadly been used over the millennia to put women in a secondary place in society, but in all probability they have been misinterpreted and misused. I know – someone uses the Bible for their own gain. Say it ain’t so!

Before I get into that, I should remind you that there are two different and somewhat contradictory creation stories in Genesis. In fact, the one Jesus quotes in the Gospel today is from the earlier story, in Genesis one. The one we read today in our Old Testament reading is the second story, from Genesis two.

The first problematic verse is, “The LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” In English the word “helper” implies someone who is an assistant and subordinate to the helpee. But the word in Hebrew, according to Wil Gafney, who is a professor of the Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Texas, carries a much stronger meaning than that. For instance, in other places in the Old Testament, it connotes divine help. And, she suggests, and here, I admit, I am taking her word for it because I’m not a Hebrew scholar, that the helper is in an equal relationship with Adam. Or, as she calls him “THE adam” or earthling.

The other thing that’s misunderstood is the whole rib thing. The word for rib is also translated as “side.” So, Dr. Gafney maintains, God took the whole side of Adam and made it into Eve. They were two halves of a whole and interdependent upon each other.

I don’t want to get into a real discussion of gender roles and, inevitably, into a discussion of same sex marriage, even though this is one of the passages used to refute it and especially used to put women in their place. Remember, the Bible is not a history book, nor is it an instruction manual. Nor, I might add, is it a biology textbook. It’s the telling of the story of God’s relationship with us, and our relationship with, and dependence upon, God.

And now, at last, we get why these Old Testament and Gospel passages are read together today. They’re both about relationship and dependence. I’m going to go out on a limb here and say that Jesus cares about divorce less because of the Mosaic law around it than because it fractures a relationship of interdependence that has been blessed by God, and also damages the relationship with God. And the lesson from Genesis is less about who can marry whom, but more about the dependence of two human beings upon each another and about having God at the center of that relationship.

Dependence is one of those really slippery words. We, in this country, tend to look on that word like it’s some kind of swear word. After all, it’s called the Declaration of Independence, not the Declaration of Needing One Another. And in July we celebrate Independence Day, not INTERdependence Day.

But except as an abstract concept, independence is a meaningless term. And dependence is not a four letter word. We are all dependent on someone in our lives, and we are all dependent on God, even if we don’t acknowledge it.

Right after Jesus gets done explaining to his disciples what he meant when talking to the Pharisees about divorce, people start bringing him their little children to bless and heal. Even though Jesus has spoken to the disciples about kids earlier, they still try to chase these people off.

And Jesus, once again, has to speak sternly to them. “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs,” he says. “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

These words are so familiar to us that they’re threatening to become stained glass language – that is things we say that sound churchy, but that we haven’t really thought about or we don’t really understand. But let’s look at these words in terms of dependence. After all, who’s more dependent in a relationship than a child? And who’s more trusting that the grownups around them will take care of them and love them?

So let’s rephrase Jesus’ words: “It is to those who trust in God completely, like a child trusts its parents, and who let God love them and take care of them, that the kingdom belongs.” What would the world look like if we depended on one another rather than pushed one another away? And what if we took care of each other with no ulterior motive? All of us, not just the people we like or the people who are like us.

As you know, there has been a lot of talk on the news and on the Internet about the latest mass shooting in Oregon. Unless you’re living under a rock, it’s hard to miss. I’m not making this sermon about gun control or mental health issues, but in all the chatter and the arguing and the politicking and the praying, one question keeps coming up over and over again: “What can we do?”

Frankly, I don’t know the answer. But I do know where the answer lies. It lies in interdependence, not independence. It lies in trust, not fear. And it lies in love. God’s great love for us, our love for and dependence on God, and our love for one another. Jesus faced huge social evils, too, and was led to his death as a result. But as we believe, as we say every Sunday in our Creed, death is not the final answer. Love is.

They will know we are Christians by our love.

Amen.