

## Homily for Sunday, Oct. 3, 2021 – 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time



Children, for the third Sunday in a row, play a prominent role in Jesus' teaching. Two weeks ago, we heard Jesus say, "**Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.**" Last weekend Jesus warned us not to put a stumbling block before these little ones. And, today's gospel ends with Jesus gathering children to

himself and blessing them after the disciples tried to shoo them away. Children's ability to be spiritual guides perhaps has something to do with their inherent innocence, or their openness, or their ability to live their lives without hidden agendas. Maybe it has something to do the simplicity of the Gospel of love that has not yet been obscured by competing theologies or adult minds that want to justify why their position is right and any other position has to be wrong. Or, maybe children just intuitively know the importance of union—union with God and union with neighbour, as the only goal that God really cares about. Children, by their very nature, have a way of bringing us back to origins, to beginnings, to what's really important in life. Before you have children, you **think** you know what's important. After you have a child, you **know** what's important.

Jesus, in today's gospel, is taking lawyers back: back to origins, back to beginnings, back to God's original plan. In Biblical times Pharisees were lawyer for all intents and purposes. They are doing what they do best; they are asking Jesus a question, not because they are interested in growing in the truth, but simply to trap Jesus in his own words and condemn him. And because these gospels are proclaimed in our midst today, what Jesus has to say to them applies equally to us. Often I settle for the minimal requirement of the law, so I can say, "There I did it; get off my back." The Law asks little and gives little; Jesus asks much and gives even more. The Law never asked Peter to walk on water, but Jesus did. The Law never asks us to love our enemy, but Jesus does. The Law never gives you inner peace, but Jesus does.

The question of adultery, in today's gospel passage, is only secondarily a question about adultery and primarily is a question of the equality of the genders. We are told in the first reading from Genesis that God made woman out of the rib of a man.

At first glance, it appears the man is more important; he came first. Patriarchal societies always want to read into this that the man was superior when really it is a story of partnership and equality. Notice how everything is deemed as good in the creation story except one thing— ***“it is not good that man should be alone.”*** It is not good that we live in a world without partnership and equality.

Jesus is asked by the Pharisees about divorce. Moses was seen as the greatest authority figure in Jewish history. And if Moses said a man could write a certificate of dismissal to divorce his wife, then that should be good enough for us as well. Right, Jesus? Jesus immediately notices the one-sidedness of this. Could a woman not also write a certificate of divorce? Jesus reminds them that Moses allowed this for one reason, and one reason alone, because of the ***hardness of your hearts***. He wanted your hearts, but he had to settle for your heads. That is the only reason he allowed it. It had nothing to do with the Law; it had everything to do with hard hearts that could no longer love, forgive, or show a willingness to start anew.

This was a concession in a patriarchal society where men had all the rights and women had none. Jesus, on the other hand, appeals to natural law, to the order of creation, which precedes Moses. It is as if Jesus is saying, “You want to go back to Moses? Fine. Here’s a better suggestion. Let’s go back to creation, to God’s intention and plan from the very beginning of time.” For Jesus, male and female are naturally complementary without a hint of domination. When one is dominating the other, they both remain immature. The man thinks he’s right and superior, and the woman submits to that and remains a little child. What is needed is equality and partnership. Moses proposes something from one side. A divorced man can commit adultery, but, according to Jesus, a divorced woman can also commit adultery. Jesus is leveling the playing field. Women had no rights which is still true in many places in the world. From the beginning of creation, though, preceding any scriptures, God made them male and female--the natural complementarity.

This passage is often chosen as the gospel reading at weddings. Maybe some of you couples chose this yourselves. After the couple has exchange their wedding vows, the priest says the words of today’s gospel, ***“what God has joined, let no one separate.”*** This is the ideal, the goal, the indissolubility of the marriage bond between two equals. I stand in awe of couples—and we have many in our parish grouping—who have taken their vows seriously in good times and in bad, in

sickness and in health. Many couples have endured and even flourished against painful circumstances that could have, and should have, driven them apart.

However, both Matthew and Paul make exceptions to the indissolubility of marriage, for the case of adultery, that is, one being unfaithful. Mark offers the ideal; Matthew offers the exception. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians offers another exception, what we call the “Pauline privilege” in Canon Law. He says, “two oxen cannot pull the plow if they are unevenly yoked, therefore a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever, one who has faith and one who has no faith, seemingly can be undone.”

Fundamentalists believe there is only one, true message in the Bible. That, in itself, is not true. If there was only one, true message in the Bible, then which one is the truthful one? Mark, Matthew, or Paul? They’re all true. Can you think that way? Can you hold Mark, Matthew and Paul together? That is what wisdom is. Wisdom, when you are open to it, tries to teach you to think with subtlety and with discernment. We hold on to the ideal we hear in Mark, but everyone in this house of worship knows someone who, for whatever reason, their first marriage did not work. Pope Francis says, “Let’s stop judging.” When he says that, he’s being consistent with Scripture that makes at least two exceptions to the indissolubility of marriage.

Which one is right? They are all right. Wisdom is the ability to hold seemingly competing truths—with all their ambiguities and tensions—together. This is hard for a lawyer, but it should be much easier for a believer. You are not trained to be lawyers. You are being trained to be loving and compassionate. To this day, Jesus blesses this love and compassion that he finds in children, in married couples, and in those feeling the pain of separation and divorce.

***Fr. Phil***