

## “Of Life, Equality, and Responsibility.”

**T**his morning’s gospel reading ranks pretty high on the cringe scale. Because anyone who has been through the pain and tragedy of a divorce, knows that things aren’t nearly as cavalier as they come off sounding in our gospel.

Last Wednesday, at the 10:00 am Eucharist in the Chapel, after I had read the Gospel, and we all sat down to talk about the readings, one of the regular attendees chuckled and said, “Well, that wasn’t very pleasant.” And so, you’re not alone if you’re wondering if anything good can come from our gospel.

Well, as a matter of fact, there is quite a bit of good stuff in this morning’s gospel reading, and it’s right underneath our noses; but in order to find it, we need to revisit the Q&A between Jesus and those unnamed religious authorities.

“Jesus,” they ask him, “is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

Now, the obvious and simple answer to that question is “Yes, it *is* lawful for a man to divorce his wife.” But Jesus also knows that the religious authorities are trying to trap him — though he’s probably not quite sure how — and so, even by offering the obvious and correct answer, Jesus might just be playing into their overall scheme.

And so, Jesus decides to turn the tables on them — he decides to try to trap the religious authorities themselves — and in order to do that, Jesus needs to lay out some bait of his own. And so, like any good rabbi, his response to their question comes in the form of a carefully chosen question of his own: “What did *Moses* command you?”

And when they answer — when they say, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her” — with that answer, the religious authorities have blindly stepped into the trap that Jesus has laid for them.

And the trap snaps shut when Jesus says to them,

“Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this

commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ And ‘for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’”

Let’s break that statement down a bit, shall we?

First, what’s Jesus talking about when he mentions their “hardness of heart”? What’s going on here?

Well, as I’m sure you’re all aware, back in the day, a wife was the property of her husband, and he could divorce her at any time and for any reason; and the woman had no say in the matter. And were that to happen, a woman was almost always quite literally out on her own, because it was unlikely that her family-of-origin would welcome her back. That meant she was extremely vulnerable to all sorts of bad things. And, that a man would knowingly subject a woman to such a potentially dangerous situation, is what Jesus was talking about when he referenced their “hardness of heart.”

So, when laws which required that a husband write a certificate of divorce were enacted, a woman’s status in society was increased just a bit. For, at a time when every “decent, honorable adult female was married,” the certificate of divorce — which the woman would keep with her at all times — would provide an understandable reason for her being unattached: She is divorced; she is not a prostitute (or what have you) and therefore at risk of being shunned, or cast out of the society, or even killed.

Next, and quoting from Genesis 2, Jesus says: “But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ And ‘for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’”

The first point of interest here is the fact that, in actuality, a man *didn’t* leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife. Generally speaking, what happened was just the opposite: the *woman* left her father and mother and was joined to her husband.

Do you see what just happened? What the author of Genesis was suggesting — and what Jesus was later asserting — was that, in the Kingdom of God, we often find that societal norms are reversed, and cultural customs are turned on their

head!

And reinforcing that notion are the words, “and the two shall become one flesh.” Now, for the longest time, I always interpreted this to be a reference to a mutual joining of two persons through physical intimacy. But recently I learned that’s not what it means at all.

What the author of Genesis 2 is really talking about, when he describes these two people becoming “one flesh,” is that they become absolutely and totally equal to one another. One is not the head of the other; one is not subservient to the other. They share a status that is completely identical.

Now, let’s go back to that Q&A between Jesus and the religious authorities. So, they’ve asked Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” And Jesus responds with that lengthy and dramatic statement: “Because of your hardness of heart...etc. However, now we understand that implicit in his response is this thought: “Yes, it is legal for a man to divorce his wife. But the real question is, ‘Why isn’t it also legal for a woman to divorce her husband?’”

And so, all of a sudden, a gospel reading which at first sounded like a discussion of marriage and divorce, is revealed to be a discussion of human equality. And more, by inference, it’s a discussion about the disparity between the way God *says* he wants us to treat each other, and the way we *actually* treat each other.

Wow! Who knew things were going to turn out this way?

In fact, in the Kingdom of God that Jesus talked so much about, not only do men and women share the same rights — each can divorce their respective spouses — but each also shares the same consequences; and that’s where we get the very dramatic language about divorce, remarriage, and adultery. It’s sort of a first-century version of “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.”

And then, and almost as an epilogue to our gospel reading, Jesus asserts that absolute equality — one flesh-ness — extends not just to the relationship between the sexes, but also to the relationships between adults and children: “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” And perhaps, we are to assume and extrapolate that this one flesh-ness should also extend to the relationships between all people.

And so, here’s the thing: While the religious authorities sought to trap

Jesus, it is they who were trapped, when Jesus revealed that their basic assumptions about the relationships of people of different sexes — and, dare I say, also between people of different races and cultures — were not only inherently unfair, but distinctly un-godlike.

Game. Set. Match.

But I want to make one final claim — and I do so in the context of a priest who is about to begin a stewardship campaign — and it's this: Not only does our one flesh-ness mean that we share the same right and consequences as everyone else around us, but we also share the same *responsibilities*.

We are each responsible to share — but only according to our means and resources — to share in the ongoing financial support of this community of faith. But I'll say more about that at some other time.

In the meantime: May God enable us to live lives that are true to our nature; true to the image of the One who created us. True, in other words, to our high calling in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.