

Proper 22 B 2018
October 7, 2018 :: Mark 10:2-9
Fr. Jim Cook

“Stewardship: Taking Community Seriously.”

For three days last week, Fr. Jeff and I attended the annual diocesan clergy conference. In other words, I didn't have a lot of time for sermon prep. So, Friday morning I'm skimming through our four readings, just to see if I had a reaction to any of them. For whatever reason, I felt drawn to the gospel. But the problem was that I'd probably preached on that passage nine or ten times over the years. And I wondered what more could I possibly squeeze out of it? And that's when this question literally popped into my head:

“When is a passage that clearly seems to be about marriage and divorce, not actually about marriage and divorce?”

And that's when I knew what I would be talking about.

A very long time ago — and I'm talking the late-second century to mid-third century — there was a man named Origen. He was a Christian theologian and Bible scholar. He was a very influential man for the early church. One of his important

contributions to the church was the proposition that scripture could be read and interpreted on three different levels. And I thought it would be fun to put Origen together with our gospel, and see what shakes out.

But before I do that, I want to remind you that, in our gospel reading, when Jesus responds to the Pharisees, he's referencing a few verses from Genesis 2. Okay, back to Origen.

So, the first type of scriptural interpretation that Origen proposed, was one that focused on the bare letters of the text. It's what we might call a literal reading or interpretation, or "a plain reading of scripture." Applying this to our gospel reading, we come up with the notion that, after God created the heavens and the earth, God then made "the man," and subsequently the "woman" to be his helper and partner. And then, much later on, when Jesus and the Pharisees are discussing the legalities of divorce, Jesus, acknowledging that scripture makes provision for divorce, nevertheless argues that, if God created marriage, then we should take it very seriously.

And that's a literal interpretation of our gospel.

But then, Origen also suggested a moral interpretation of scripture, in which we look between the lines for guidance on what constitutes right and proper conduct. Applying this to today's gospel, we might conclude that, although God created marriage, and even though scripture provides ways to end a marriage, *the best course of action* is to do all in one's power to preserve and strengthen marriage.

And that's the moral interpretation.

But then, and finally, Origen suggested an allegorical interpretation of scripture. And this one is really the most exciting for me, because it invites us to venture behind, and beyond, the literal and moral readings, in search of deeper and more spiritual messages. In fact, Origen says that it's through the allegorical interpretation that *we will find Christ*, and find guidance for our relationships with God and one another.

Applying this allegorical mode of interpretation to today's gospel, allows us to understand the story of the creation of Adam and Eve, and their joining, as an allegory for God's creation of humanity, and community; and it suggests the idea that we are

best suited for each other, and that our duty to each other is to be partners and helpers. *And*, what God has created — that is, the human community — “let no one separate.”

And that’s what we get from the allegorical interpretation of our gospel.

So there you have it: three different ways of looking at, and interpreting, the very same readings. And even though I’m inclined to rank all three to be of equal importance, Origen seems to have been of the mind that the literal method was the least helpful in general, and the allegorical method was the best for understanding the mind of Christ. And in some ways I’ll agree, because the depth and richness of scripture is revealed more and more when we move beyond the literal interpretation to the moral, and from there to the allegorical modes of interpreting. I mean, it’s a good thing to go through the efforts of a literal translation, but, you know, what a shame if you stop there.

To summarize, what I take from our reading from Mark, is a message about the vital importance of community. In fact, as I read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, from the Ten

Commandments to the Summary of the Law provided by Jesus, what I find woven throughout every page is the theme that community is “the name of the game.” And, that the two traits that strengthen and support community are faithfulness to God, and fidelity to each other.

Now, I’ve been a parish priest for nearly 30 years, and served in three churches. It’s always been my goal that, no matter where I was serving, I would try to help that parish become the most welcoming and embracing community possible. *And*, that virtually everything that goes on in that parish, either: supports the larger parish community; or enables the formation of smaller, more intimate groups within that larger community; or moves us to bring our mission and ministry into the extended, civic communities around us.

Now, think for a moment about all of the groups that make up our larger parish community. And I’m thinking about things like: the Altar Guild; the Daughters of the King; the Youth Group; the Book Club and Bible Study Group; the Wednesday Morning Chapel group; the Choir; our Ushers and Greeters; our Lay Eucharistic Ministers and Visitors; the Vestry; Narcotics

Anonymous; the Foyer and Dinner Groups; the Acolytes and Lay Readers; the Sunday School Teachers; the Sunday Adult Forum; even our corporate worship every Sunday, and especially the time we take to pass the peace (which, on some Sundays, can be considerable) — all of these smaller groups contribute in some measure to the larger group that is St. Andrew's Church.

And it's in those groups and communities — large and small — that we learn about, and exercise, the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5: 22-23a). And it's in those groups and communities that we are affirmed as individuals, and where we affirm others in the name and love of God.

I was reminded of the importance of community in a personal way last month, when Peggy and I drove to Austin, and Emily flew to Austin from Berkeley, to be with Laura and Joel, as they awaited the birth of their first child. It was a blessed time of getting reacquainted, and when ties were nurtured, and bonds were strengthened. And it felt so good to have that community reunited, so that we could all welcome the newest member of that

community, Max. “Blessed be the ties that bind,” the old hymn reminds us. And it’s true.

I think that one of the real blessings of the rites and sacraments of the church is that they provide us with an excuse to gather together. After being scattered for six days of each week — attending to our jobs and homes and families — we come together for Eucharist, or baptisms, or youth services, or garage sales, or what have you, to renew and strengthen our ties to each other, and to God. And I am fed, and I am encouraged, and I am filled with joy when I am with you. And I suspect that you feel the same way.

The annual stewardship campaign at St. Andrew’s is all about creating and sustaining a very special kind of community. At various times throughout the year, we’ll solicit your time and talents. But here and now, during these few weeks, we solicit your pledge of financial support because that’s a vitally important part of how we keep our doors open.

And if you value what this parish provides for you, then all I ask is that you prayerfully consider what part you will play in keeping the ball rolling. And we need to be as generous as we can,

because the measure in which we support this community — through the gifts of our time, talents, and treasure — is the same measure in which this community can support us, and the people around us.

In other words, St. Andrew's Church is God's gift to us. What we do with it, and what we make of it, is our gift to each other, and our gift to the world.

Amen.