

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22) – Year B – October 4, 2009

Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

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It isn't just fiction that presents us with complex stories. The realities of life can equally feel like "mission impossible". Few of life's challenges are so easily resolved as those that are edited nicely into the ninety or one hundred minutes of a movie. Today's Gospel reading presents us with our own mission impossible to contemplate and work through, maybe not entirely today, and maybe not even in months. The topic is divorce, an issue that is as real today as it was in first century Palestine and back into the times of Moses. In modern day thinking divorce has become an intensely personal issue. In the church, the joining together of two people in marriage is a solemn community event, blessed by God. Therefore, as a community of faith, we must ask the hard question of why the secular view of divorce -- being private and personal -- has become so dominant.

I'll begin and end today's message by sharing some wise words from chaplain, Donna Schaper, who wrote an article in *Christian Century* some time ago, titled, *Marriage: The Impossible Commitment*. She says, "The church's message is primarily ... the good news that speaks a word of freedom.... The good news is not that the God of love delivered us from difficulty and failure but rather that he permitted, by his own death and resurrection, our entry into these experiences with hope. Herein lies the power we have to risk the impossible -- namely, fulfilling an intimate relationship." (End quote). I know of no marriage that has not had difficulties. I know of many marriages that have ended in divorce, often accompanied with bitterness, anger, and at least some sense of failure. I also know of marriages that were mere legal shells of this solemn and blessed covenant. Marriages in name only where divorce was essentially the dissolution of a legal contract, and where God's intent for mutual love and respect was seldom, if ever, present. Marriages in name only, where vows were made in God's sight, but under false pretenses, and never honored, especially those where there is a cycle of abuse and violence. Ultimately, where there is no intention to love, honor or respect a partner there is no marriage, or even the core of a true relationship. Some of you will have experienced this first hand. Having worked in a shelter for battered women and their children, I have great respect for the immensity of your courage. For those who are still living in fear, it is important that you know that violence is never acceptable in marriage, in dating, or in any relationship. There is help for you, and most importantly there is hope.

In today's Gospel lesson, the Pharisees are back to test Jesus on the controversial question of divorce. They are trying to force Jesus to take one side or the other on the issue, knowing that it will make Him extremely unpopular with the other faction. There was, in fact, a well-documented ongoing debate within the Jewish sects about the grounds for divorce. Mark reports how Jesus outwits the Pharisees by changing their question about divorce to one about the divine grounds of marriage. Jesus' authority to instruct and teach, outstrips that of even one of **the** greatest of the Israelites' ancestors, Moses. The certificate of dismissal that Jesus refers to is the instruction found in Deuteronomy (24:1-4). In that portion of the Law, a man was permitted to write a certificate of divorce for the most superficial of reasons, for example, if, as written, "she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her" (Deuteronomy 24:1). Notice that at this point Jesus is focusing on the Law whereby only a man can divorce a woman, and clearly for the absolute minimum of subjective reasons. From what we already know about the patriarchal society of Jesus' day, a woman was treated as property, passed from her father to her husband by contract and usually the exchange of money or goods. She would have little or no say in the matter of her marriage or any subsequent divorce. However, she would bear the stigma of shame -- especially around the loss of her virginity -- and the terrible burden of economic hardship. In order to simply survive, she may have been forced into prostitution. There was no safety net, no alimony, and legal recourse for the women of that era. A divorced woman was as vulnerable as the children Jesus gathers to himself and blesses. All legally correct in the eyes of the Law, yet much more seriously in the eyes of God, an abusive and unjust treatment of women, condoned by Moses because of man's hardness of heart. As Jesus is about to tell us, it is not what God intended for marriage or any other committed

relationship.

It has been written that, “Marriages are made in heaven, but they are lived on earth” (George P. Weiss). Jesus points to God’s intent for all those who choose to marry. Schaper calls it the impossible commitment with good cause. The marriage commitment is a metaphor for divine-human relationships. It is meant to be a covenantal relationship that extends beyond time into eternity, with profound implications for how we are called to treat one another in this life, and to remind us of our dependence on God. As always, Jesus is constantly challenging us to live in obedience to God’s will, and to move beyond a legalistic approach to an affirmation of God’s purpose. The incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus’ presence amongst us, fulfilled God’s purposes, one of which was to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth. The Pharisees wished to rationalize their behavior by appealing to their legal rights. Jesus appeals to God’s perfect justice and love. What is required of us in the kingdom of God, but to love God completely, and to love our neighbors as ourselves? Can we do anything in this world without God’s help? No, not one thing. Realistically, we are forced to acknowledge our own brokenness and human frailty. This is not a perfect world. We are imperfect humans. Yet God’s steadfast mercy and graciousness remain. Love is always worth the risk. The courage to risk is grounded in hope. The source of all our hope is centered in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Schaper asks, “What do we ourselves deeply want? Do we prefer the script of unredeemable failure to the drama of God [and God’s desire for goodness in our lives]?”

Marriage is a gift of God’s grace, grounded in creation, and therefore God’s purpose for the world and all that is in it. Through the gracious gift of His Son our Savior, Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God is here. As the Psalmist says, the kingdom is a reality where, “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other” (Psalm 85:10). When love and faithfulness meet, compassion and mercy grow. When righteousness and peace kiss, there is justice and mutual support in the bonds of relationship. These are not just platitudes. Our ability to live into the kingdom of God is by God’s grace made real in our lives in tangible ways. It is made real in trust and faith, when we care enough to be involved with one another, not in some nosy or gossipy way, but out of genuine and mutual love. A divorce is no less painful than the death of a loved one. Depending on the circumstances, whether welcome or unwelcome, divorce is another form of loss that can push us into the process of grieving. Those who live through the tragedy of divorce may be feeling unworthy of God’s love, or be overwhelmed with feelings of anger and resentment, not to mention the challenges of having to suddenly find a job, or pay a mortgage on one income. It is not a time for a community of faith to pull away, but a time to be there for one another, and to offer comfort and support in practical ways. Does a divorced parent need help to find a job, buy clothes for the kids, or to move house? Do they need a shoulder to cry on, or a trusted friend to listen without judgment? Might they need someone to mow the yard, offer to help with the bills, or watch the children so they can get a break? Kingdom living does not support isolation and loneliness. Love is a verb.

Here is a final word from Schaper, “The gospel provides few answers about how we should live or what decisions we should make.... [It] transcends the law only to name a more difficult law -- that of love, first of God and then of each other, even ourselves. ... We make our own decisions and live with their consequences. But in a love that will not let us go, God provides the clue to our purpose.... We are called and empowered to the task of love and to its consequent justice. We are called simultaneously to provide each other with the sanctuary of love and the challenge of justice, and to expect the other to provide the same for us. This expectation is not private or individualistic; it is the mission of humanity, not only of spouses.” Let all the people say,

Amen.