

27nd Sunday – B 2012  
Deacon Pat Hall

Genesis 2:18-24; Hebrews 2:9-11; Mark 10:2-16

*Homilies are vehicles for breaking open the Word of God. First read the Sunday readings at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/100712.cfm>*

Divorce: talk about one of the top ten words in our language that can set one's blood to boil.

We lament in our American culture our high divorce rate. We ache for our children whose lives are disrupted by the break-ups of parents. We long for those earlier years when divorce seemed uncommon. Yet there is nothing uncommon about divorce.

The reason that Jesus is speaking about divorce with the Pharisees is because divorce was all too common in first century Palestine<sup>1</sup>. Marriage was primarily considered a legal arrangement between the bride's father and the groom. The concern the Pharisees were posing to Jesus was really not the issue of divorce or no divorce. Their society had in place legal mechanisms for divorce that strove to protect everyone's rights. A husband only needed to establish "grounds" upon the principle of *erwat dabar*, "something objectionable".

The procedure involved the husband giving the wife a certificate of divorce protecting her from future claims of the former husband and freeing her to remarry. The dispute among Jews of that time had to do with the grounds of marriage: What is "something objectionable"? Some gave it a strict interpretation such as sexual misconduct. Some thought it meant "Even if she spoiled a dish for him."

The fact that the Pharisees posed the question to Jesus as divorce or no divorce hints that they had prior notice of Jesus' radical teaching regarding marriage, because radical it was...and radical it remains.

Jesus trumps the pharisaic legal protections of the day by sharing God's will for marriage as revealed in Genesis. God did not make woman as a commodity to be bargained for and disposed of.

*"This one, at last, is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;" (Gn 2:23)*

*God created mankind in his image;  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them. (Gn 1:27)*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gospel of Mark, Sacra Pagina*; p 296

This is how God designed humankind. Divorce is humankind's reaction in trying to accommodate our concupiscence towards broken relationship.

Given our propensity towards broken relationships, it would be naïve to “just say no” as a solution to our divorce situation.

As a former public safety officer, I responded to hundreds of domestic violence calls. I'd say only the number of arrests we made for “driving while suspended” topped the number of arrests we made for domestic assault. Officers were trained not only in their legal response, but also in the social dynamics of what made up spouse assault in an effort to interrupt the cycle of the “battered spouse syndrome”.

I'd respond to the scene, stop the violence, render first aid and arrest the perpetrator (the man, more likely than not).

I'd then counsel the victim (the woman, more likely than not) and explored the dynamics in their relationship that might set the stage for a subsequent attack.

When I told one woman that not every man beats his wife, she looked at me like I was from Mars. I lost all credibility with her as it was her life experience that that was exactly the fact of life, that all men did beat their wives.

One day while I was on foot patrol in the Stuart neighborhood a woman rushed up to me calling out, “Officer Hall, Officer Hall...I have to tell you...!” She went on to say how years earlier I had responded to her domestic assault. Her husband was a deadbeat and routinely beat her. She endured the beatings for the sake of her children. She went on to say that I told her she wasn't made to be someone's punching bag, that I was afraid for her life. I told her that her kids wouldn't be well off if their mom was dead. I had also told her that she was role-modeling for her children what a marriage was, after all, that was the only marriage they really knew anything about. She said I had also told her that her son was learning that it was OK to beat one's wife and her daughter was learning it was expected to be beaten.

She said that she had kicked him out of the house with the threat of arrest for any future violence. She got a job. She divorced. The ex-husband got a job. She bought a house for her and her kids. The father became a good father, supporting them financially and just being a good dad to his kids. She and her ex cooperated for the good of their children. Their family was safe and happy. She wanted to thank me for the role I had played in her pivotal decision.

The funny thing about it, although I never let on to her, was that I didn't know this woman from Eve. I had absolutely no memory of responding to her domestic violence, although the words she parroted back to me sounded like the words I used to share. I thanked her for her gratitude and wished her good luck.

Now as a Catholic, I never counseled divorce as a police officer. That type of counsel would have to come from someone else more qualified and more acquainted with the couple's situation. My role was to interrupt the cycle of violence.

But while I can be sad about yet another divorce, I am gladdened that this couple had found a more life-giving way to raise their family. This divorce stuff isn't simple.

And yet, are we to resign ourselves to divorce as the natural outcome of bent and broken relationships?

At my marriage prep classes I get to see beautiful young couples seated in front of me excited about their future. The ones who show up at a Catholic marriage-prep class are usually bright, kind, caring and conscientious.

But they hear from me that being bright, kind, caring and conscientious is not enough. They are being called to love each other, exclusively and unconditionally, for life. I tell them that this is a "beyond human" effort, that they don't have what it takes to make it work. I tell them not to be anxious, because they were not only made as creatures of this earth, but they were also made to be the divine sons and daughters of God. God supplies. He is truly present in all of our sacraments. When they allow God's grace to fill them, they have no need to fear about their marital commitment. They have the right to hope that they can be, beyond mere human effort, all that God hopes for them.

The image Jesus presents to us of two becoming "one flesh" is not just for married folks. You may have heard me from time to time say that the Bible is not just a rule-book for proper behavior and relationships; the Bible is the very self-revelation of God. The Bible tells us who God is.

The Bible cites marriage often to illustrate our proper relationship with God. One does not have to be married to practice unconditional love for others and exclusive obedience to the Father.

The mystics of Catholic tradition have often favored the Song of Songs from the Old Testament in their contemplation of an immanent intimate relationship with our creator. The Song of Songs isn't just about the union of a man and a woman. It inspires hope that union with God is the destiny of all who accept what his Son won for us on the cross.

We experience that union when we come to this altar to receive his body and blood.

And so while Jesus' lesson does instruct us who are married or those who hope to get married, it is ultimately the promise of our eternal destiny.