

Homily for the 27th Sunday, Oct. 4, 2009

Gen 1 and Gen 2 provide us with two different accounts of the creation of the world. Both stories give ideals of what God wants for our world. The second account, the one we have in today's liturgy, is the more graphic storytelling; it shows God creating humans in stages. At first the man is created incomplete, lonely. So God decides to create a real partner for him, one that can confront him. At first God tries various animals whom he brings to the man to name. In Hebrew thought, naming signifies dominion over what is named. (That is why humans cannot know the name of God; they cannot control God.) But none of the animals can confront the man so as to overcome his loneliness. And so God creates the woman who is actually made of the man's own flesh and blood, and so is equal to him. The man immediately recognizes the difference with his joyful cry, "This, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." He names her, signifying his dominion over her, but the inspired author balances that dominion. Instead of the woman leaving her house to join the man, as is usual in a patriarchal world, the man leaves his family to cling to his wife so *the two of them become one*. Since woman is equal she can overcome his loneliness.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus uses this joining of two as one being to respond to the Pharisees' question about divorce. As is usual among the Jews, Jesus answers their question with one of his own: "What did Moses say?" In Deut 24:1-4 Moses had insisted that a man divorcing a woman give her a bill of divorce to keep his legalities straight. Jesus' rejects this as male hardness of heart. He quotes three separate verses of Gen 1-2 to establish the ideal situation for which men and women were created---an unbreakable bond between a man and his wife which God himself had created. "What God has joined together, no human must separate." Presumably the Pharisees go away.

In the house, Jesus' private place of communication for the Christian community, the disciples question him about his unique teaching. Jesus repeats it even more strongly: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries commits adultery against her, and the same for a woman."

And so, in a culture in which almost 50% of marriages end in divorce, **what does this passage mean for us?**

First, note that Genesis 1-2 is speaking of the ideal state of humans. This is the goal of all marriage, not just Christian marriage. But it is not just a pie in the sky ideal: God clearly is understood as putting a man and a woman in an

unbreakable bond sealed by their intercourse. Jesus is talking about a real situation of two becoming one person. Some of you married couples know the reality of being one, and you know that breaking that bond to marry another is committing adultery. Jesus is talking about real cases.

Secondly, in agrarian cultures everything conspires to keep couples together. A man and a woman form one economic unit; economics hold them together. Extended families are involved in the relationship, and so social structures hold them together. People lived face-to-face in close-knit small villages, and so honor and shame conventions kept them together.

Most of that is shattered in our culture, where husband and wife often both work in separate jobs at some distance from each other. Nuclear families dissolve the closeness of familial ties. The social mobility of moving from one end of the country to another makes us anonymous to one another, and not responsible to one another. And finally modern psychology so exalts one's ego that becoming two in one flesh is often not seen as a goal. Economics, social breakdown, and modern psychology splits up marriages. And so it is not surprising that the ideal to which Jesus refers is lost.

And so it happens that people whom God could put together never get put together. In recent years the Church has recognized that even people who have had marriage preparation and have gotten married in the church do not form a sacramental bond. Rather than becoming an increasingly overlapping circle, they remain two circles which touch each other only tangentially. In that case, the church helps them through the annulment process to discover this sad (and perhaps even sinful) fact and to find healing and the freedom to move on in their lives. I encourage those of you who are divorced to explore this opportunity.

Thirdly, that does not mean that indissoluble marriage it is not a realizable goal for us American Catholics. St. Paul says in Romans chapter 5 that where sin abounds, Christ's grace abounds all the more. Besides the words of Jesus, the proof of it is that even divorced people persist in thinking that the next marriage will be a life-long union. How, then, do we Catholics live so as to attain that ideal marriage?

First, we must in our own lives reverse the destructive tendencies of our culture—not just the individualism and materialism, but the breakdown of extended family relationships, the haphazard mobility which removes us from reinforcing social bonds, the factors which breakup our sense of being one economic unit. That could mean refusing a promotion in our firm which would

destructively dislocate us from our roots and our friends. It is a question of priorities and values.

Secondly, we must educate our children in the ideals of a personal commitment. It means encouraging our children to develop friendships in which they get to know and feel committed to one another. That probably means spending time with one another rather than tweeting one another across the world. (On our altar servers' whale watching excursion I saw an adolescent girl who spent the whole time of the trip in the midst of this beautiful scenery, the enjoyment of which binds us together, working her silly little gadget. And her stupid parents sit there letting her waste her life.) It also means a clear understanding that sexual intercourse is not a casual gesture or a plaything, but something that belongs to and cements a personal union deeper than sex itself. (If your children think that this is a quaint notion of old fossils like myself, point them to the contemporary examples of heroic athletes like John Brockman or Tim Tebow.)

Thirdly, it means that all of us must commit ourselves to Jesus' way of the cross. Marriage takes a staggering amount of hard work and self-sacrifice. It is a kind of crucifixion of my "I" so that "We" might emerge. We have to live the cross and teach it to our children. What better way to teach this message than to experience the example of Jesus, who in the Eucharist gives us his own Body and Blood to be consumed for our sanctification. Isn't that the perfect image of Christian marriage?

And finally, all of this means a life of prayer. The old Catholic adage says, "The family that prays together stays together." Children must see that their parents' being rooted in Christ's faithful love is what keeps their parents together. And parents themselves learn to love one another as Christ has loved us by finding one another in prayer. That is why we must all increase the amount of time we give to prayer. Opening in prayer to the loving Christ in one another is what ultimately means that God has joined us together, indissolubly.

Good news in a lost world.