

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 27th SUNDAY (B)

Genesis 2: 18-24 Psalm 128 Hebrews 2: 9-11 Mark 10: 2-16

By *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

I will be a visiting preacher at a parish this weekend. I called in advance with a request of the staff: “Tell me about your congregation” – a kind of “congregational analysis.” We itinerant preachers have to do that; unlike the local preachers who already have a good knowledge of their people. I may not have a pastor’s grasp on the congregation but, from my experience, I can be sure of a couple of facts: there will be single parents and divorced people in the congregation. There will also be other couples who are in a second marriage, after having their first annulled .

Others will be in a second marriage, without having gone through the annulment process – some because they did not qualify. Others may be like a friend of mine who is in a second marriage. He told me, “When I married my first wife we were in love. After 20 years and many changes in our lives we grew apart... we were walking different paths. I don’t want to go through the annulment process and say hurtful things about her, or something that isn’t true, just to get the annulment. So, I have not applied for it.” That’s not the first time a person in a second marriage has told me that.

In Sunday’s congregation people, like the ones I just described, will be listening. How will those divorced and/or remarried, hear today’s gospel? Will Jesus sound harsh and unbending? Will the gospel stir up past or present guilt; a sense of failure or inadequacy? Will the well-married be moved to a sense of superiority and egoism? “Marriage is hard, but we made a go of it; we stayed together. Why couldn’t they?”

It’s a day we might be tempted to change the gospel reading because it evokes so much; or preach from one of the other readings. But still, people will hear the gospel and draw their own conclusions. Best to wrestle with it and do our best. I’m sure local pastoral ministers have much more experience than I with the type of situations I just described. Still, here’s one itinerant’s approach to listen to the spirit of Jesus for light and guidance.

Jesus places the ideal of a permanent loving relationship before us. In a morally adrift world that has grown used to: television soap operas, season-long series (“Sex and the City”) and “reality shows,” with their casual sexual situations, language and mores, Jesus’ teaching can sound terribly old-fashioned, even quaint. But besides stating the ideal, isn’t Jesus also suggesting the Good News in his teaching? For those who “accept the kingdom of God like a child,” what the world may consider parochial or outdated and impossible – is possible. That’s why we gather for Eucharist; we acknowledge we need help to live up to Jesus’ teachings and example and we turn to God for help and nourishment.

Jesus says a man who divorces his wife and marries another “commits adultery against her.” (He says the same about women who divorce their husbands.) In Jesus’ Mediterranean world families arranged marriages and so a woman’s whole family would be shamed if she were divorced. Think of the conflict then between all the male relatives in both families. How often would a divorce lead to bloodshed between such families? Perhaps the reason divorce was originally prohibited was to prevent such feuding and bloodshed.

Jesus’s hearers would have heard another piece of Good News – – for women. In his time men could divorce their wives, “Moses permitted a husband to write a bill of divorce and dismiss her.” But that’s not the plan God had in mind when, “God made them male and female.” What would happen to a woman who was “dismissed” by her husband? At that time she couldn’t go to night school to learn medicine or computer skills. Have you noticed how often prostitutes are mentioned in the Gospels? Is that what happened to “dismissed wives” – those women, outcasts from their own families, who had to support themselves and their children?

Jesus’ prohibition of divorce by men would be good news to wives who could be easily be put aside and suffer, who knows what fate in their villages? Jesus prohibiting divorce by both men and women was treating both with a kind of equality. It seems women, normally considered insignificant in his world, are recognized by Jesus as having power too.

There were some who interpreted the Mosaic law about divorce rather loosely. Deut. 24:1 gives permission for a man to divorce his wife if he “finds something objectionable about her.” Some thought the “objectionable” thing could be as trivial as poor cooking. So, for example, if a wife burned the pot roast she might

find herself “dismissed.” Who then would support her and her children? Jesus’ teaching about divorce could provide a fixed structure for a couple to live together with some sense of permanence and security – especially for the women.

We could say our society has come a long way. Still, even today, divorced women and their children become very vulnerable. How many of these women do we know who are trying to hold down jobs and raise their children without the support of their former spouses? Check the poverty rolls. While civil law views marriage as a legal contract, our religious tradition also holds it as a sacrament. God is involved in the union of a man and woman in Christian marriage. And more. The love between them is a sign of Christ’s love for his church.

Mark is a gospel of mercy upon mercy. None of us in the pews can look down our noses at anyone else and claim to be better Christians than they. If we haven’t realized our own sin and asked for forgiveness, can we even claim to be Christian? Throughout this gospel Jesus is calling followers to a new community not determined by blood relationships. He seems to be putting family ties aside (3:31 – 35). He even described families being divided because of him (13:12). To those who left their own families he taught about forming a new family (10:29 – 30).

Our ideal is a loving and permanent union between a man and a woman in marriage. The whole community benefits from such permanent structures and people of faith see in them signs of God’s abiding presence. Such unions challenge the partners to be faithful, loving and self-sacrificing for one another. This ideal of perfection, which reflects the image of God’s love, is also impossible to achieve; still it is worth striving for.

We know from our experience how difficult marriage can be. When a marriage is failing sometimes nothing remains but hurt and the potential for still more hurt. In such painful circumstances people feel there is little alternative but to end the union and try to begin again. It seems these days this is more and more the case. Those who acknowledge their own failings in marriage and still want to continue following Christ, will ask for forgiveness for any part they may have played in the break-up.

It’s a challenge to our Church to consider how we are to treat those sincere and wounded people who have gone through a divorce. While our laws are meant to protect the institution of marriage for the common good, still, Jesus has taught

mercy and forgiveness. He kept persons primary in his ministry. How can the Church do the same during this time of crisis for the institution of marriage and the family? By holding fast to its current laws and restrictions? Or, while raising up the ideal, also ministering to those wounded by their previous experiences in marriage, who now hope to start afresh in new relationships – and still be full participants in the church.

FAITH BOOK

*Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run.
“Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins
people take home.*

From today’s Gospel reading:

...a man shall leave father and mother and be joined to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh.
Therefore, what God has joined together,
no human being must separate.

Reflection:

While our Church’s marriage laws are meant to protect the institution of marriage for the common good, still, Jesus has taught mercy and forgiveness and in his ministry he kept persons primary. How then can the Church do the same? By holding fast to its current laws and restrictions? Or, while raising up the ideal, by also ministering to those wounded by their previous experiences in marriage, who now hope to start afresh in new relationships – and still be full participants in the church.?

So, we ask ourselves:

- By their love and commitment to one another which married couples have witnessed to me the blessings of the sacrament of marriage?
- What can I do or say to give support to those who are struggling in their commitment to one another?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

**"It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him"
(Genesis 2:18)**

“From beginning to end, the Bible is a story about marriage and love. Throughout the Old Testament the love of God for his people is compared to the love of husband and wife for each other, and in the New Testament Christ’s love for the

church is compared to the love of a husband and wife for each other in the sacrament of marriage. In their love for each other, a husband and wife discover the presence and power of God in their lives. The family based on marriage is society's smallest, yet most important community" –small and beautiful," the place where children are prepared in love for life."

(Homily on Marriage by Irish Bishop Christopher Jones Aug 16, 2009)

In a world filled with a lack of peace and injustice, it is a great sadness that much of this discord can be found within the walls of our homes and in the heart of our marriages and families. The stress on today's couples and families is extreme. Economic struggles, career pressures, and time and emotional constraints, have made strong and faithful marriages a rare treasure.

Did you know?

The U.S. Catholic Bishops have launched the **National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage (NPIM)**, a multi-year effort to communicate the meaning and value of married life for the Church and for society. The Initiative brings together Catholic teaching and pastoral practice, social science research, and the experience of married couples. There are great things to read and things to do at: [http:// www.foryourmarriage.org/home.asp](http://www.foryourmarriage.org/home.asp).

"The bishops want to strengthen marriage as both a human institution and Christian sacrament. They wish to:

- offer a Catholic witness to the meaning, value, and sanctity of marriage;
- connect Catholic belief and teaching with current marriage issues;
- strengthen marriage through the life cycle by listening to the experience of the Christian faithful;
- work with our fellow citizens to promote marriage-friendly laws, public policies, and other social strategies;
- promote more and better ministries to marriage, particularly in parishes;
- help couples themselves to witness to the value of marriage;
- encourage dioceses, national church organizations to provide leadership and resources on behalf of marriage."

What can I do?

Go to: <http://www.foryourmarriage.org/home.asp>. Share this website with your spouse, your children and your friends.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Abner Nicholson #0670167 (On death row since 11/18/99)
- Andre L. Fletcher #0130628 (12/09/99)
- Terry A. Hyatt #0199877 (2/07/00)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

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