

“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 just presided at a mass for the divorced. I have immense admiration for members of this small community. There are those in the group who have been divorced for a while. They do a unique ministry to others who have recently had a divorce and are still feeling raw pain and intense emotions. My experience with this group of very fine people is that they frequently feel left out of their parish. They say they never hear preaching that addresses their lives. Well, today maybe an opportunity for the preacher and for the congregation to hear the word "divorce" spoken from the pulpit, but without the tone of condemnation and guilt some people have heard in the past.

The preacher really can't avoid the gospel's discussion about divorce, and we shouldn't. The divorce rate for recent marriages is around 50% in this country. There will be many people in our congregation who have been divorced, grew up with divorced parents or are presently considering a divorce. Think too of those younger people in the congregation who are hoping to be married. They may hear Jesus' message as an unreasonable call to perfection. On first hearing his words can sound so unyielding to people who have had or may be in the midst of a painful marriage and those who may be concerned about the effects on their children if they stay in a marriage filled with tension or even violence. The ideal Jesus places before people with these concerns, may seem to contradict their own experience of marriage.

I try never to use the shorter version of the readings that are sometimes offered as an option. Nevertheless, because of the issues the first part raises about divorce, I would choose the shorter option and save another occasion to read and preach on Jesus and the children--- the next baptism might offer just such an opportunity. The sacrament of marriage deserves special attention today.

Some reflection on how the symbol of marriage is used in religious traditions may help open up today's gospel. There is a long history of sexual union or marriage used in symbolic ways to describe the relationship between God and an individual or a people. Thus, marriage is used in the Hebrew texts to describe the intense

bonds of love between God and Israel. For example, the "Song of Songs" is an intense poem of praise of the mutual love between God and the chosen people. The relationship is described in images of human love. This way of describing the covenant in marital terms is not just unique to the "Song of Songs"; it is also found in such prophets as Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

For Christians, marriage is used to describe the union between Christ and the church. For example, Paul says to the Corinthian community, "I am jealous of you with the jealousy of God, since I have given you in marriage to one husband, presenting you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Cor. 11: 2. Cf. also, Mt. 9: 15; 25: 1-13, Jn. 3: 29). So, in both testaments the figure of marriage is used to describe God's exalted love for the covenanted people. We can sense then the deeper significance marriage has for believers: not just in itself, but as a pointer to our relationship with God. We see similar symbolism in the Catholic marriage ceremony. One of the Nuptial Blessings says, "Father, you have made the union of husband and wife so holy a mystery that it symbolizes the marriage of Christ and his Church." Another blessing says, "Father, to reveal the plan of your love, you made the union of husband and wife an image of the covenant between you and your people."

Ideally marriage partners give themselves totally to one another. So, marriage is a suitable symbol for our relationship as individuals and a church with God. As in the ideal of marriage, in response to the call from God we have received, we are to give ourselves as a total gift to God in trusting love. Just as marriage usually results in offspring, so should the fruits of our loving union with God result in offspring—a rich variety of loving works for others. The lives of the well-known saints, and the anonymous saints as well, bear witness to the heroic lives and acts that come from the realization of how much we are loved by our God and the assurance that this love is unbreakable. We have the security that God will never break the bond, never give up on us, never walk out on us.

So, Jesus is calling on the long biblical and mystical tradition when he lays out the ideal of an unbreakable marriage bond. Since marital love was used as a visible sign of God's invisible but concrete love for us, Jesus calls for the indissolubility of Christian marriage. Marital love is so much more than sexual union; or rather, sexual union not only involves a union of bodies, but also the union of minds and spirit. In biblical language it is called a union of "hearts." Here heart is the symbol for what is deep; what springs from a person's innermost being. Marriage is a

commitment of the heart, like God's commitment of faithful love ("hesed") to us. We hear in the marriage vows two people promising to be faithful to each other in "good times and bad, in sickness and in health." This is also the promise we have exchanged with God. God will not desert us. Nor will we give up on God when we experience sickness and bad times. Nor will we forget our covenant with God when we seem to need God less, when the times are healthy and good to us.

The symbol of marriage also helps us look at today's eucharist. Jesus' first miracle was at a marriage banquet. Two people making a lifetime commitment provided a suitable setting for the miracle that symbolized God's abundant and overflowing love for us. The wine of joy and celebration—overflowing from God to us. Celebrate! Toast the love God has for us!

Jesus' life, death and resurrection have their powerful effects on us and in marriage we can see these effects concretized in love that is generous, patient, mutual, self-giving, forgiving, faithful and permanent. Marital fidelity is a vivid reminder that Christ stays with us in good times and bad. Marriages do fall apart; sometimes this happens over a long period a splinter at a time; sometimes because of a sudden act of betrayal. Jesus presents the ideal today of a permanent loving relationship that reflects God's intentions for humans from the beginning. As it says in our Genesis reading, "the two become one flesh." They are inseparable. But we humans are weak, ignorant, make rash and immature decisions--- and we sin. While Jesus holds out the ideal, he also recognizes our human incompleteness; our hearts are not fully turned to him, nor do we give our hearts fully to one another.

The gospel presents the vision of a whole new way of acting and being. Whether we are married, divorced, single or vowed celibates, we all know how far we are from fully embracing that vision of new life. We struggle to live the gospel ideal in all walks of life, including marriage, but we fall short. We do not give up the ideal though, we are here today at eucharist to have our hearts turned more fully to the God whose heart is always and totally turned to us. We hope that today is another step on our journey to be faithful, not only to those to whom we have made vows, but to all we are called to serve. We look for more faithful hearts in our service to others. All of us want our loving ways to reflect God's permanent and life-giving love for humanity. If our hearts fall into the category Jesus calls "hardness of your hearts," then we ask that the eucharist do the work of making our hearts more pliable to God's ways.

JUSTICE NOTES

The Mousetrap

A mouse looked through a crack in the wall to see the farmer and his wife opening a package; what food might it contain? He was aghast to discover that it was a mouse trap!

Retreating to the farmyard, the mouse proclaimed the warning, "There is a mouse trap in the house, there is a mouse trap in the house."

The chicken clucked and scratched, raised her head and said, "Mr. Mouse, I can tell you this is a grave concern to you, but it is of no consequence to me; I cannot be bothered by it."

The mouse turned to the pig and told him, "There is a mouse trap in the house."

"I am so very sorry Mr. Mouse," sympathized the pig, "but there is nothing I can do about it but pray; be assured that you are in my prayers."

The mouse turned to the cow, who replied, "Like wow, Mr. Mouse, a mouse trap; am I in grave danger, Duh?"

So, the mouse returned to the house, head down and dejected to face the farmer's mouse trap alone.

That very night a sound was heard throughout the house, like the sound of a mouse trap catching its prey. The farmer's wife rushed to see what was caught. In the darkness, she did not see that it was a venomous snake whose tail the trap had caught.

The snake bit the farmer's wife. The farmer rushed her to the hospital. She returned home with a fever. Now everyone knows you treat a fever with fresh chicken soup, so the farmer took his hatchet to the farmyard for the soup's main ingredient.

His wife's sickness continued so that friends and neighbors came to sit with her around the clock. To feed them, the farmer butchered the pig.

The farmer's wife did not get well, in fact, she died, and so many people came for her funeral the farmer had the cow slaughtered to provide meat for all of them to eat.

So the next time you hear that someone is facing a problem and think that it does not concern you, remember that when the least of us is threatened, we are all at risk.

-----this parable was sent by Rev. Robert Morin

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Roger Blakeney #0032802 (On death row since 9/10/97)
- Jerry Cummings #0095361 (11/11/97)
- Elrico Fowler #0134151 (11/14/97)
- Erroll Moses #0552017 (11/18/97)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

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