

## PROPER 22 B 09 ~ Sunday, October 4, 2009

- If you had to sum up the whole Christian story of salvation – a pretty good way to do it is with the metaphor of marriage: *the history of salvation is the story of God giving himself for the life of the world*. We know God gives himself for the life of the world by the way he gives himself to us, *in Jesus*. And God gives himself to us in Jesus, in the sacraments. Here is a statement you can memorize and pass on: *sacraments are gifts for the life of the world*. Sacraments are given for our good – they communicate God’s love – *and they build us up*, just like they build up the whole Church. Let me say it again: *sacraments are gifts for the life of the world*. And this means that the sacrament of marriage is given for the life of the world.
- We learn from Jesus that, *through him*, God invites the whole world into a marriage relationship. I have on my shelf a book by the wonderful English spiritual writer, Donald Alchin. It’s title is, *The World is a Wedding*. It’s been true since the beginning of time, but not everyone has known it. The people of Israel knew this, because God shared the idea with them. But mostly, they seemed to forget it. And so, the idea became a centerpiece in the teaching of the prophet Hosea. Through Hosea, God reminded Israel they had a relationship with him that no other nation had – they were like a marital partner with God in a holy covenant. But the trouble was, Israel behaved like a wayward spouse. Because of this, some of the imagery in Hosea can seem negative. Yet the underlying message is *fundamentally positive*: God invites Israel to be his bride. And through her, all of the people of the world are called into the same covenant relationship. Paul picks right up on this central image in his letter to the Ephesians.
- Though Israel had been called into something like a marriage with God, the people’s relationship with him was not always so positive – and sometimes was rather difficult. Yet in spite of this, God called them back, time and again, to discover a healing in their relationship with him.
- Human experience teaches us that the same thing can be true in marriages between people. Something that is *good in itself*, something intended to bring good *to us*, in time can become difficult, and less than *good in practice*. And of course, even though God seeks to bring healing into broken human relationships, *some* broken human marriages seem beyond our ability to heal. In recognizing this fact, we can grant it more legitimacy than it deserves. And then, we risk assuming that marriages are always difficult and that they often fail. Many young people these days seem to delay or avoid marriage because of this assumption that marriage will be difficult. Even though *marriage is given for the life of the world*, we so often come to look at it in terms of *a much lower horizon*.
- The Pharisees seem to have this perspective, when they ask Jesus their question. *Notice with me that they do not ask Jesus about marriage, though they may think it is a question about marriage*. But when they ask Jesus if it is alright for a man to divorce his wife, they are starting *where most of us start* when we ask questions about the moral life. So often, when it comes to a moral question, we start by asking, what is *permitted*? What will God *allow* us to do?

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- *Think about that for a moment. How high a horizon is that – to ask what we are allowed to do? That’s not a very big step above asking, “what God will let us get away with!”* And because they have gone through the whole of the Five Books of Moses, and have come up with a list of 613 laws, the Pharisees *already know* the answer to their question.
- And Jesus knows *they already know* the answer they are expecting, the answer they want to hear. But instead of giving in to their low-expectation-starting-point, he responds by asking them a slightly different question: Jesus asks them, ‘What did Moses **command** you?’ And they answer by talking about what Moses **allowed**. → Notice that. Jesus asks, ‘What did Moses **command**?’ And they are in a very different place, thinking *instead* in terms of, ‘what did Moses **allow**?’
- *As Christians, we are called to see the moral life as being on a whole different plane than how the world typically sees it.* Jesus shows us again and again, we are to start **not** by asking, what will God **allow**? We are to start by asking, *what does God want? What does God hope for*, when it comes to how we will live. When you start with *what God asks* of us, suddenly, the stakes are very high. *Suddenly we discover that God asks for everything!* Just like the title of that popular devotional book, I discover that God wants “my utmost for his highest.”
- And so *instead of responding on their level*, when the Pharisees ask if divorce is allowed, *Jesus points them in a whole different direction.* He says to them, in effect, ‘O yes, Moses *did make that concession* for you and your human weakness. But from the very beginning of humankind, *God has made us for something much better than that.* God made us male and female so that men and women could join together in marriage, and become, *as it were*, one new person as a result of the covenant. What God joins together in unity, according to his vision and his purposes for the world, we should be careful not to dissolve.’ *While we focus on external constraints, Jesus points us to internal possibilities.*
- It is the same way he wants us to look at any aspect of our lives. For example, we might ask a question that has come up repeatedly through the whole of Christian history – a question which arose in connection with the life and ministry of St. Francis (*whose feast day is today*): *should we, as Christians, have private property?* If we ask this question looking *only* at what is **allowed**..., and then cling to the “**yes**” answer we get from God, *and go no further than that...*, we are *hardly seeking to please* God with our lives. Because what we *should* do, is ask **why** God has *let us have* things in the first place. And if in Jesus, we ask God **why** we **have** things, and then follow Jesus’ teaching and his example, the answer will take us *to a whole new place*. The answer will have a lot to do with *what we can give up* and offer to God, and offer to others, for the life of the world.
- This is especially how God in Jesus wants us to go about looking at marriage. Because marriage is such an important metaphor in Scripture for God’s relationship with Israel, and for God’s relationship with the world, and for Jesus’ relationship with the Church.

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Marriage models for us God's purposes for the world: that people come into covenant with each other, and into covenant with God, in relationships that are *life-giving*. For this reflects *God's own way* of coming into *selfless relationship* with others. As we have already said, sacraments are given for the life of the world. *Like the sacrament of Baptism* that underlies it, the sacrament of marriage is given for the life of the world—not to *limit or confine* us, but to help bring us into the *fullness* of life.

- And so our Gospel reading is *not really about* what God will *allow* us to do. If someone asks you at lunch today what today's Gospel was about, or what the sermon was about, *don't say, "divorce!"* Only the Pharisees think this is a question about *divorce* and about law. Instead, *we should try to see things like Jesus does*. Jesus is thinking **not** in terms of "what God will **let** us do." Instead, he lifts their eyes, *as he lifts our eyes*, to another plane – to a broader horizon. *He lifts us up* to consider what God **wants** us to do, and to see that this is about *love* and about *how God would have us live*. Our Gospel today is about what Jesus *calls* us to do, which is to rediscover *God's hopes and purposes* for us and for the world. And, he calls us *to re-imagine* that – with his help – we can actually *live into* these uplifting hopes and purposes for us.
- By the power of the Holy Spirit, God in Jesus always comes to *meet* us where we are. But he is never content to *leave us* where we are. **God in Jesus comes to meet us where we are, precisely so that he can lift us up to where he is.** And he never wants us to forget this, because he continues to give himself for the life of the world.