Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost October 7, 2018

All Saints’ Church Year B Proper 22

Genesis 2:18-24 Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Psalm 8 Mark 10:2-16

We give thanks dear Lord for all the ways you adorn us with glory and honor.

My daughter, who is teaching 9th graders poetry at King’s Academy, a boarding school in Jordan, just told me the other day about the importance of ***understanding tone*** as you begin to unpack the meaning of a poem. And ***understanding tone*** as you begin to learn about how to live in a new culture.

I think tone is really important in understanding scripture as well.

When I turned to the gospel reading for today- a difficult passage about divorce and the edict against divorce, I was comforted by my conversation with my daughter. Before we begin to unpack the meaning behind this scripture, we need to understand its tone.

(Experienced my own divorce)

The men coming to speak with Jesus are coming to ***test him with closed hearts***. When they ask, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” they are not asking out of concern for their love or commitment to their spouse. They are not coming with any vulnerability or worry about their promises and their vows. There is no tenderness in their question. Far from it.

They are coming to see what they can get away with. “What’s the least we can do and still be seen as respectable men?” “How can we get ***our way*** and not be hurt in the process?” “Do I really have to stand by my wife, especially when she irritates me?” “How do I look out after me, which is actually my #1 concern?” “How much sin can I get away with?” This is the ***tone*** of their questioning: selfish, self-absorbed, petty, niggling, impatient, abusive, superior and judgmental.

So Jesus asks (with a sigh as he can see right through them), “What did Moses command of you?”

Ah, and this is when they reveal their hearts: “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and divorce her.” Oh my, there could have been so many wonderful answers to Jesus’ open ended question. Like “choose life, not death,” or “shelter the sojourner,” or “feed the hungry,” or “honor the Sabbath,” or “pray for your loved ones,” or “be still and know God” or “it’s not good that adam, the earth creature, should be alone.”

So many possible beautiful responses… but no, these testing scholars…. they expose their indecency by dredging up a potentially cruel edict.

Jesus sees right through them. This legal certificate of dismissal, ***if used to be*** ***expedient***, left women abandoned, rejected, separated from their family and their children, alone, terrified, with no access to help or resources. This edict used in this way became the anathema of Jewish life and love and family. It gave men a pass to use their power in horrific ways. There’s nothing religious or uplifting or meaningful about this certificate when used in this ***utilitarian*** way. As much as it was demeaning for women, it was also demeaning for men.

These scholars’ question is not about love, or seeking truth, or revealing vulnerability. The tone is simple: ***I want what I want***. I will use my power and my privilege to get what I want. I am entitled. I have earned whatever position I believe is mine to have. Give me whatever resources I can manipulate to get what I want, all the while dressing it up in God language so I appear respectful.

Jesus is harsh in his response. “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses wrote this commandment for you.” In other words, this certificate ***at its heart-core*** is about the faintness and frailty of our humanity. Yes, the Mosaic law provided for divorce because life doesn’t always turn out the way you hope. I know. You know. No matter how tragic divorce is, it may be preferable to greater tragedies. There are circumstances that are critical and need honoring. Moses made room for these difficult life issues.

In other words, don’t minimize tragedies and pain to create your own escape valve.

Jesus wants to wake these scholars up. He turns to the creation story of Adam and Eve. He changes the text. He directs our attention away from how we muddle through our own self-absorbed ways, to a First Story that describes God’s intention for women and men’s mutuality and love from the beginning.

God creates us for one another. The state of holy matrimony will become the sign between two people of that unity God desires for all.

God appears like a potter shaping life, making partners. The Hebrew word partner used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible always refers to God. In other words, we are God-like partners for each other. We give each other our dignity. We need each other to find fulfillment, to cling to each other, to be as intimate with each other as bone to bone, flesh of flesh. We leave our mother’s home to find each other in the great love story of living. The story of Adam and Eve is a love story. So are our vital friendships.

Jesus turns the scholars’ intellectual justification, which appears to be about divorce to be about something else- the real thing. It’s not about divorce, at least not “little d” divorce. Rather it’s about how all of us, married, unmarried, gay, straight, men, women, young and old live in the shadow of the Great Divorce.

What is the Great Divorce? The Great Divorce resides in all of us….. that fragmented part of us that rebels against God, so much so that we lose our way to the great love story of living. To the great love story of our believing, which is not about some intellectual ascent, but rather about belonging to ourselves, to each other and to God.

What is Jesus saying? Believe in your blessed humanity and do not get lost in the Great Divorce, where we become afraid of our own nakedness and vulnerability.

We forget that when Jesus is talking about faith, about believing, he is not talking about “believing in him” as some kind of intellectual assent, but rather he is talking about a heart movement which is a ***way of living*** which is about trust, loyalty, engagement and commitment.

A few Sundays ago, I spoke about how to “translate our faith” so that we can be engaged with people who either are outside of the church or those who understand scripture “literally” so much so they negate God’s love and mercy.

What do we say, especially to our children and grandchildren about our faith? It’s right here in this strange encounter with Jesus.

I am going to rely on Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, because he says it best:

“Tell them to remember there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments. And above all, let them remember to build a life as if it were a work of art.” (*I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*, edited by Samuel H. Dresner, p 63).

Yes, indeed, life as a work of art! We can rest in our First Story which lifts up our dignity and our capacity to not be afraid. Life is not about blame or praise, victor or victim, shame or pride, punishment or glory. Rather life is about humility, witness, compassion and forgiveness.

In the end, Life is about Union with the First Ancient Heart of all Love.

Life is a love story, bone to bone, flesh to flesh. Jesus keeps walking ahead of us, showing us the way to this Love. AMEN