

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 4, 2015
Church of St. Leo the Great – Oakland, CA
Homily Rev. Brent Howitt Otto SJ

Reading 1GN 2:18-24

The LORD God said: "It is not good for the man to be alone.
I will make a suitable partner for him."

So the LORD God formed out of the ground
various wild animals and various birds of the air,
and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them;
whatever the man called each of them would be its name.

The man gave names to all the cattle,
all the birds of the air, and all wild animals;
but none proved to be the suitable partner for the man.

So the LORD God cast a deep sleep on the man,
and while he was asleep,
he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.

The LORD God then built up into a woman the rib
that he had taken from the man.

When he brought her to the man, the man said:

"This one, at last, is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;

this one shall be called 'woman,'
for out of 'her man' this one has been taken."

That is why a man leaves his father and mother
and clings to his wife,
and the two of them become one flesh.

Responsorial Psalm PS 128:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

R. (cf. 5) May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.

Blessed are you who fear the LORD,
who walk in his ways!

For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork;
blessed shall you be, and favored.

R. May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.

Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine
in the recesses of your home;
your children like olive plants
around your table.

R. May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.

Behold, thus is the man blessed
who fears the LORD.

The LORD bless you from Zion:
may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.

R. May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.

May you see your children's children.
Peace be upon Israel!

R. May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.

Reading 2HEB 2:9-11

Brothers and sisters:

He "for a little while" was made "lower than the angels, "
that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

For it was fitting that he,
for whom and through whom all things exist,
in bringing many children to glory,
should make the leader to their salvation perfect through suffering.
He who consecrates and those who are being consecrated
all have one origin.
Therefore, he is not ashamed to call them "brothers."

Alleluia 1 JN 4:12

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

If we love one another, God remains in us
and his love is brought to perfection in us.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

GospelMK 10:2-16

The Pharisees approached Jesus and asked,
"Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?"
They were testing him.
He said to them in reply, "What did Moses command you?"
They replied,
"Moses permitted a husband to write a bill of divorce
and dismiss her."
But Jesus told them,
"Because of the hardness of your hearts
he wrote you this commandment.
But from the beginning of creation, *God made them male and female.*
For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother
and be joined to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh.
So they are no longer two but one flesh.
Therefore what God has joined together,
no human being must separate."
In the house the disciples again questioned Jesus about this.
He said to them,
"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another
commits adultery against her;
and if she divorces her husband and marries another,
she commits adultery."

And people were bringing children to him that he might touch them,
but the disciples rebuked them.
When Jesus saw this he became indignant and said to them,
"Let the children come to me;
do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to
such as these.
Amen, I say to you,
whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child
will not enter it."
Then he embraced them and blessed them,
placing his hands on them.

HOMILY

This Sunday the scripture readings may appear to be all about marriage and divorce. It might be tempting to let our minds immediately wander into the charged debates that have raged in our country in recent years about marriage, family and sexuality. Let's try to silence all that noise for a moment. We owe it to ourselves to look at these scriptures on their own terms and through the eyes of faith, rather than the lens of political conflict.

And for those of you who, are not married or don't plan to get married, like myself as a priest, then these readings might just sound irrelevant or even alienating. But again, let us not allow this to get in the way of us looking at these scriptures on their own terms and through the eyes of faith.

For they are the inspired Word of God, so they must have something to say to us, some way they meet our reality, to nourish, to challenge, to help us grow. I think we are going to find that these scriptures are not only about marriage and divorce, but actually bear a more universal message – about companionship, interdependence, about love expressed in commitments – that has implications for how all of us live, whether married or unmarried.

Our first reading from Genesis is, in part, an etiology – a story that explains how something has come to be what it is. In this case it gives us an explanation of why there are men and women, how marriage came to be, and the underlying divine plan.

This is one of the two accounts of creation in Genesis, and here God first created a man. And all the other creatures are made because God sees that the man is not happy because he's alone. As nice as all the animals are, none makes the man happy. And so God makes a woman, out of the very same substance. Then the man rejoices, "she is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" he exclaims. She is his equal.

This is all about companionship, the human need to be together with equals. There is no subordination here! Now the writers of Genesis couldn't have been naïve to problems. Not every marriage is smooth sailing. Equality between spouses, for one thing, was rarely respected in the ancient world. But despite reality, the writers reach back and proclaim what marriage was intended to be: a gift from God of loving companionship, because our God cares deeply for human beings to be happy.

It's in this same vein that Jesus also speaks when questioned by the Pharisees about divorce. He does not deny the law of Moses which permitted divorce, but reaches back to an earlier part of the tradition: the ideal of marriage outlined in Genesis. There, it's a companionship of equals, so they will be happy and not alone. See how it's an image of God's love flowing into humanity, through the bond of marriage, and giving life to future generations? It is nothing short of an invitation to be co-creators with God of beauty in the world. Those of you who have children know the sheer awesomeness of the

miracle of birth! But the way the divorce law was being applied in Jesus' day, did not coincide with this mutuality, love and cooperation with God.

The Law stated that a man could simply write a bill of divorce for whatever reason and dismiss his wife. Women, however, could not do the same to their husbands. Imagine how this could be abused! Men who tired of their wives, had a disagreement, or got infatuated with another woman could, to save themselves from guilt of adultery, divorce their wives and marry another.

Consider what this meant for a women in that day and age: if divorced she would either have to return disgraced to her own nearest family, or if they refused to take her back, she'd spend her life begging and foraging to survive with her children. This was unjust, and sinful.

Jesus' challenge is to rise above the letter of the law, to a moral and spiritual level. Marriage is about a love that commits to the good of the other. What is selfish is not love. Commitment shouldn't be broken easily, especially when it risks the impoverishment of others.

And so Jesus says...if a man divorces his wife and marries another he commits adultery; and if a woman divorces her husband and marries another she commits adultery. Now the curious thing is that a woman did not have this right under Jewish law, so why did Jesus say it? This may be a clue that Jesus is speaking on a *moral and spiritual level*, not a legal one. He is speaking not about legal conditions of permissible and impermissible, but rather about our motives, our intentions, and living in a way that honors the love God has for us by showing it to others through real care and commitment.

Our psalm portrays the family through the symbol of a flourishing garden, full of grapes for wine and olives, and in the center, a table where abundant food is shared by all. That's the ideal. How many of you would describe your thanksgiving meal like that?! It's important to have ideals. But it's also important to know that we don't come close to them without some hard work.

Many of you know far better than I how a marriage works. But needless to say, it takes compromise, thinking of the other not just oneself. It takes saying sorry and admitting faults. It takes being able to forgive. It takes a commitment to keep finding new ways to love one another, as both people change over time. Love of a newly married couple at 25 years old is different from their love at 35 when they may have a couple of children to love as well, or at 45 with teenage kids, or at 65 with an empty nest. People change and so they must commit to changing *together*.

This is good material for people to pray about and reflect on when they're thinking about getting married. Or when marriage gets tough...to return to the foundations...how did this love start? What's that sacred spark, that indication from God that this was the right person? Can a couple retrace their steps to the place where they

knew they were on the right path, and go forward again from that place in the company of the God who desires their happiness?

Some of this is true for all human relationships. God made us to be interdependent, lovingly committed the companions we find on our journey. Friends from childhood have to grow and change together if they want their friendship to be deep when they're adults. We have to love them as they are. Take them as they are. Ask them to receive us also, just as we are. And there is a humility in that. We can't quite make anyone just the way we would prefer them to be! We also have to face that we aren't perfect either. Humbly we accept our friend, or spouse, or mother or father, or sibling, or children, as they are; knowing full well we too must humbly ask to be accepted by them with all our foibles. Living lives that are loving and committed to our companions, means really being dependent on Mercy. The mercy we give and receive from others, but which ultimately is the Mercy of God moving through us all the time – working redemption, and healing, and reconciliation.

The two exemplars that we get today, for love and commitment, are actually not even married.

The first one is Jesus – single person, but also Incarnate god. As the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, Jesus shows his solidarity *with us*, his self-gift *to us*, his self-sacrifice *for us*. He enters the human condition and calls us sisters and brothers. He brings us to glory and makes us holy, despite our sins. And he tastes death so that all might have life forever.

Is there any better way to love our spouses, friends, and maybe especially the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the poor or outcast, than by imitating Jesus' way of loving commitment? It's not easy, but notice that it's a life full of love and connections with others. He has deep meaning and purpose.

Children are the second exemplar of love and commitment we get. In the gospel, right after the Pharisees confront Jesus about teaching on marriage, it looks like children were flocking to him yet the disciples were trying to keep them away. "Children are to be seen and not heard" I can imagine one of the crotchety disciples saying!

But Jesus welcomes them and blesses them. He says something stunning to his disciples: "The kingdom of God belongs to such as these children. Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child, will not enter it."

What is the wisdom of children? They love freely. They yearn for love of others. They know they can't be **independent** or **autonomous**, so they claim their parents' love, which they deserve.

Can we be like that with God? Or do we say, "I can handle this on my own" or "I don't need you" or "let me sort this out first, and then I'll come to speak to you". No, let's bring everything we are, all we have, all we need to the face and ear of God. To Jesus, whose job it is to bless us as he did the children, to make us holy, to make us one with each other and God.

So how can we **be like Jesus?** ...loving and committed to spouses, children, our friends, or even strangers? Committed even if it means some sacrifice? Cherishing the companions we have...

And how can we **be like little children?**...coming to Jesus freely, loving him freely, being proud of our dependence on God's grace, asking for what we need?