

Marriage and the Cross

My grandmother was married to a man who became an abusive alcoholic.

When my Mom was 12, her parents were divorced, and because my grandmother belonged to a denomination that cut people off from the sacraments after a divorce, my grandmother lived nearly the rest of her life believing, in her heart of hearts, that she was damned.

It was the kindness of a local priest who came to visit her in her hospital bed where she lay dying of lung cancer that finally placed a dressing on what had been a wound open for a lifetime: he gave her absolution and gave her holy communion; allowing her to die in peace.

Whenever today's gospel lesson is read, it's the story of my grandmother that comes to mind.

Perhaps you know a similar story; perhaps you have lived a similar story.

The pain of these stories is that the church has, for years, badly misread the lesson given to us today.

For too many years, we have read this lesson as a law in the shape of a newly sharpened knife – a knife that cuts those already wounded by divorce.

It's time to look again at today's gospel lesson.

As you know, context is key, and it is the context of Jesus' teaching today that for too long was thrown out of the window.

Jesus, today, isn't confronted with one who is getting divorced or one who is living in a difficult marriage.

We know how Jesus responds to the Samaritan woman who's been married five times and is now shackled up with lover number six.

Jesus doesn't call her an adulterer – he doesn't condemn her – he offers her the living water of eternal life.

We know about the woman caught in the very act of adultery, cringing and crying on the dirty street, surrounded by men holding stones just waiting to bash her head in; and does Jesus join the men holding stones ready to punish?

Jesus looks the men in the eye and invites the one with no sin to start the execution – and no one does, because no one can – and Jesus takes the woman by the hand and helps her to her feet: "Has no one condemned you?"

“No one, sir.”

“Then nor do I condemn you; go, and don’t do this thing anymore.”

The son who runs through his entire inheritance only to return home when he is broke and hungry isn’t turned away; he’s greeted like royalty by a father who can only think of his joy in having his child safely at home.

That is Jesus when he is face to face with those who are in the midst of messes, messes like divorce.

That is not the context today.

Today, the legalists are at it again.

Remember, these are the same guys who come to ask trick questions like: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?” and “whose wife is she in heaven if she is widowed seven times?” and now today: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

These guys aren’t looking for wisdom, they’re looking to lay a trap.

Remember, just a few weeks ago, Herod cut off John’s head because John objected to Herod dumping wife number one so he could marry his niece.

Maybe Jesus will put his own head on the block with his answer, these legalists may have thought.

It is in that context that we need to hear what Jesus has to say.

And once again, Jesus turns the tables on those who think they stand justified before God because in their own eyes they have followed the rules, in their own eyes they have paid their dues and therefore can now insist on God opening heaven’s gates to them.

And once again, Jesus says: “That’s not how it works.”

They ask about divorce and Jesus responds by talking about marriage.

They ask about the letter of the law, and Jesus responds by talking about God’s intent for us.

They ask about things that are small, but Jesus responds by pointing to the eternal.

He responds to the question intended to trap by insisting that just as God intends for us to love our enemies, just as God intends for us to forgive endlessly, to sell all we

have and give it to the poor, to take up our cross and follow him, to feed the poor and visit the prisoner, to wash each others feet, just so, God intends that married couple become one flesh.

Are we always faithful in forgiving our enemies?

Do we forgive endlessly?

Have we sold all we have, giving it to the poor?

How often do we in fact pick up our cross or feed the poor or visit the prisoner or wash each other's feet?

No, we fail at these things quite regularly.

And, very often, we fail as well at marriage.

And when that failure occurs, Jesus is not standing over us ready to throw rocks at our heads.

He is the one who bends down, takes us by the hand, and says: "Get up, your sins are forgiven, try again."

What Jesus keeps insisting upon is that our relationship with God is not based on a bargain: "I follow the rules and you reward me God;" an attitude that leads to a lifetime of looking for loopholes and twisting words and scheming designs.

Our relationship with God is like the kind of marriage that God intends for us from the very beginning.

It is a relationship founded on mutual trust, mutual admiration and mutual respect.

It is a relationship that grows in the midst of conflict, of disappointment and pain; becoming something completely new, something unpredicted, even profound.

A fellow tells the story of his wife who decided she would start learning how to make a Hawaiian quilt.

She never made a quilt before, so before she began, she drew out what she expected it to look like when she was done.

The sides were of equal length, the colors in an orderly and matching fashion.

Then she began.

As days turned to weeks and weeks to months, the quilt grew as a patchwork of colors and designs; never quite even at the sides; with an unexpected line of threads here; a bold colored piece there.

After nearly a year of sewing and mistakes and mid-course corrections, the quilt was complete.

It looked nothing like the original drawing; but it had instead a depth of color and strength of character that the woman never saw coming.

While no one would mistake it for a professionally sewn quilt, it hangs on her wall, reminding her of the 40 years she has lived with her spouse, in a marriage that like the quilt began with plans and dreams, only to become something far different, yet far deeper than those early dreams thought possible.

And there is this.

Today's gospel doesn't end with Jesus discussing marriage and divorce; and yet it ends with a gentle coaxing toward the way life can be lived so that successful relationships are possible.

It ends with Jesus welcoming little children and blessing them: telling us that if we wish to have eyes to see heaven's gate – in this life and in the next – we need to become like these young ones, who stand in complete need, who receive with joy, who expect nothing, and who therefore have hearts that are open, eyes that can see, ears that can hear the gentle whisper of the God who holds us close, in our failures and in our successes, assuring us that no matter what, we are loved – and because we are loved – it is possible move out of ourselves and to love one another.