

“Bone of My Bone and Flesh of My Flesh”

Dorothy Whiston
 New Song Episcopal Church
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Genesis 2:18-24
 Psalm 8
 Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12
 Mark 10:2-16

As I begin this morning, I want to lift up that tomorrow – on Oct. 4th – we celebrate the 27th anniversary of the founding of New Song Episcopal Church, along with the Feast of St. Francis. I don’t know if that shared date was intentional or coincidental, but I think it’s a nice pairing. And, incidentally, on Oct. 6th, John and I will celebrate 43 years of marriage. Amazingly, all these events are actually relevant to today’s texts!

New Song was founded as and continues to be a shared ministry congregation – where the equality of souls is meant to manifest in equal opportunities for ministry of all kinds, both ordained and lay. And we intentionally practice an equality between ordained and lay ministers in our community that is actually fairly rare in the wider church. Thanks be to God and to all of us!

St. Francis extended this sense of valuing the other as a cherished equal into the realm of animals and plants, the land, water and air. Francis’ enormous love for God flowed into a very generous, dynamic love for all of God’s creation, and especially for the poor, among all his beloved neighbors.

As for our marriage, I’ll just say that God’s grace and faithfulness have abounded and abided in keeping two pretty competitive, willful people on the same team through thick and thin. God has truly been good to us, and we’ve had some good fun and made some good trouble along the way!

Today’s texts are obviously about marriage, but they’re really about much more. We again join Jesus and his disciples on their way to Jerusalem, where Jesus has now twice predicted he would suffer and die. His disciples have continued to deflect that prophecy and to be rather dull-witted and hard-hearted as Jesus has led them across all sorts of boundaries to offer people healing, spiritual insight, and blessings untold.

As they went, Jesus challenged the disciples’ long held and religiously sanctioned beliefs about the relative status of outsiders and insiders, aggressors and victims, men and women, children and adults, and rich and poor. Without fail, Jesus stood with the most vulnerable as he showed the disciples that personal salvation and social transformation always work from the bottom up. As uncomfortable as it might be, God works with our weakness even more than our strength to bring integration and harmony within us and among us.

Today’s Genesis story remedies the one aspect of creation that God looked at and declared “not good” – human isolation. We are social animals and need healthy and meaningful relationships throughout our lives in order to flourish. No one is meant to be an island. This story offers an archetypal image for intimate human relationships.

Since a good majority of people seem to be attracted to people of the opposite gender, it makes some sense to portray this essential kind of human relationship in its most typical expression. But to say that God creates most people to be heterosexual is really no different, and has no more moral implications, than to say that God creates the majority of people to be right-handed, which is also true. This is not a teaching about hetero- or homosexuality, nor really about sexuality at all. Rather, Jesus is lifting up the potential for human relationships to bring life-giving companionship, crucial help, and even full spiritual communion through covenantal love shared by true partners.

As usual, the Pharisees were more interested in the religious legalities than they were in how marriage might be an expression of God's love working among us. But Jesus was having none of it. He accepted that human relationships sometimes break a part, even as he knew that isn't God's doing. Nor is it something God would ever punish people for, thereby adding to their suffering.

I have a friend who talks eloquently about how, after she got through the devastation of her parents' divorce when she was a young adult, she came to realize that they're both better people, better parents, and even better friends to one another apart than they were together. There are no limits to God's love and redemption and none of us who've been divorced or who may divorce are outside of God's grace.

In talking with the disciples about divorce, Jesus brought up something totally unexpected. Something that was not at all part of the Jewish laws about divorce. He spoke of women as free and equal agents in marriage, whether a marriage endures or ends. In according equality to women, Jesus was celebrating Adam's original recognition of "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." What a lovely way to express the deep joy of knowing and being known by an equal! In sad contrast to that, still today we often hear some version of "boys will be boys" to somehow justify men's exploitation of women. Again, Jesus would have none of that!

Jesus understood religion and marriage as a coming together of people to serve God and all God's children by embodying and expressing covenantal love among equals. Neither religion nor marriage is meant to enshrine one group of people over another. That is simply not God's way in the world. Rather, both marriage and religion are meant to be laboratories of self-giving and forgiving love, and so instruments of spiritual transformation. They are meant to protect and lift up rather than exploit the most vulnerable.

In the ancient world, and sadly still today, children dwell at the bottom of the human totem pole. Children are the most vulnerable of our species, and really all species, due their profound and relatively long-term dependence on others to meet their basic needs. Their powerlessness makes them the easiest to ignore, exploit, or abuse.

Yet, Jesus was indignant when the disciples tried to shoo kids away as though they weren't worthy of his attention. He scolded his followers, saying of the children, "it is to such as these the kingdom of God belongs" as he took them in his arms and blessed them. And he warned that "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Something I'm sure the disciples were as confused by as they were loath to hear. To be

honest, that same discomfort is probably at least somewhat true for most of us post-modern adults as well.

A good deal of Mark's gospel is about power dynamics in the human community. We all know that in the so-called "real" world, the more powerful you are, the more likely you are to get your needs met and see your dreams fulfilled. Jesus came to show us that this is an unreal and unsustainable world. A world we made in our own distorted image rather than the world created in the image of God.

It's understandable that we've fallen into this shared illusion of "us vs. them" and "might makes right," which is really what original sin – or the origins of sin – is all about. This great mistake was simply part of the evolutionary process that helped us become human. It happened when our evolving, immature but wily egos convinced us that God was not our benefactor and life-giving model to be imitated, but was rather our #1 competitor.

Don't get me wrong – we need our egos to come into our own and then give ourselves away and thus realize the fullness of our humanity. But our egos – and our very selves – can only truly mature when we recognize something – or Someone – as transcendent to our personhood. Religion aside, we simply must acknowledge something that holds our collective allegiance and helps us maintain social cohesion. Or, our resulting insecurity will lead us to try to make others subservient to us, even if we have to do them in in the process.

It seems I'm programmed to quote Bob Dylan in sermons these days, and his song "You're Gonna Serve Somebody" comes to mind here. The chorus says:

You're gonna serve somebody,
 Yes indeed you're gonna serve somebody.
 Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
 But you're gonna serve somebody.

That's simply how we humans work. And the devil, for Dylan as well as in much of the Bible, is us in our estrangement from God. Devil means "divider" – one who brings division – and without a transcendent unifier that's what we do. We try to divide and conquer. Just take a look around our world today.

In order to cherish and serve one another as beloved equals, whether as spouses, parents, children, or just friends and neighbors sharing this planet, we are utterly dependent on something greater than us. We need Someone who can hold our Center and empower us to reach out in unifying Love. We are indeed, gonna serve somebody, and as for me, I choose to serve our Father/Mother God of Love, however poorly I sometimes do that. And I'm so glad to have you, my fellow New Singers, as companions on the Way!

Thanks be to God.