

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
October 3, 2021
27th Sunday of Year B Gen 2:18-24, Mark 10:2-12

As you can see [*pointing to four large floral arrangements*], there was a wedding here yesterday. Church weddings, and this goes for all denominations, have dropped markedly in recent years. You have to look very hard in the Wedding Pages of the New York Times to find a ceremony that took place in a church setting. Most often now it is a hotel or some event space. The officiant is no longer a clergyman or clergywoman, but some friend who has been designated for the role, having been certified as an authorized minister by registering online with something like the Universal Life Church, or my personal favorite, the Church of the Latter Day Dude, a reference to the movie character, "The Great Lebowski." Since in this part of the country a Catholic priest is not permitted by diocesan regulations to officiate at a ceremony outside of a church, in a hotel or event space or on the beach or in a park (except in certain cases when it is a marriage between a Catholic and a non-Christian), a new variation has developed. Those couples who want to begin their married life, asking for God's blessing upon their union, will now have a rather small ceremony in a church with their immediate family and closest friends, and a short time later have a "celebration" of their marriage with their extended family and all their friends on the beach or in a park or at some event space. So, marriage customs and rituals are still evolving.

Of course, there are those couples who do not want a wedding ceremony at all, who want to continue living without the benefit of the proverbial "bell, book and candle." Back in the 1950's Doris Day used to sing, "Love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage; you can't have one without the other." Today there are those who object to that view, claiming that marriage is the "Bermuda Triangle" of relationships, that marriage kills the romance. And, we have Tina Turner posing the question, "What's love got to do with it? Is it just a sweet, old-fashioned notion?" Let's look at today's Gospel to see if the answer Jesus gives the Pharisees, who come testing Him about the legal grounds for divorce, can provide us with a vision of marriage, sufficiently hopeful and realistic, so that people contemplating taking that step might have the courage to do so, and that those who are married can reaffirm their commitment to grow in the love they pledged some years ago at the altar.

If we were to ask the married couples of Jesus' day, "What's love got to do with it?" they would probably answer, "Not all that much!" Back then marriage was viewed as basically an economic enterprise, an arrangement between two families for the transfer of property, a way of perpetuating the family line. Not very romantic! In

marrying, a woman never became a full member of her husband's family, and was certainly not his equal, as was demonstrated by the fact that she could be separated from him through divorce, which only the husband could initiate. What she did become through marriage was her husband's property. And if we were to ask the people of Jesus' day, "What was the wrong with, what was the moral evil of adultery?" they would not answer a "betrayal of trust." Rather, for the Jews of the time of Jesus, the wrong of adultery was theft. Adultery was wrong because it was theft of a man's property, viz., his wife. Hence, in the listing of the 10 Commandments, we see that the sixth amendment, the prohibition against adultery, comes right before the seventh, the prohibition against stealing. The whole rationale concerning adultery centered around property rights, on the husband's rights to legitimate offspring, on the continuity of the family line.

As we look to the response of Jesus concerning the question concerning the legal grounds for divorce, we see that Jesus does not involve himself in the dispute between the different rabbinical schools on the subject, viz., whether one had to have a serious reason for divorcing one's wife, or whether any reason, no matter how trivial—not being a good cook--would give the husband permission to initiate a divorce. Jesus does not involve Himself in the legal dispute. Jesus is not a lawyer; He is a teacher of wisdom. Instead, Jesus gives what might be called a "vision statement." He answers by explaining what is God's plan for marriage. He looks back to the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. Now, these chapters are not some kind of "Eye Witness News" account of the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden. They are the Bible's depiction of how human beings should live in harmony with creation, with God, and with each other. As the story unfolds it is human beings' sin that destroys the harmony that God intends for the human race.

In today's first reading from the book of Genesis we see depicted the attraction, the bond, the closeness, the harmony that God intends for a man and a woman in marriage. Jesus refers to this in his response to the lawyer's question, "At the beginning of creation God made them male and female." What Jesus is doing is stating that a woman has the same dignity as a man; she is not an inferior human being; they are both created in the image of God. The rather poetic way that Genesis describes the creation of the woman illustrates this very fact. Today we might think of God making the woman from the man's rib as something like taking a spare part of the man to make a woman, thereby giving her a secondary status. That is because today we think of the brain as that part of the body that characterizes our identity, our individuality, our dignity. But for the ancients, who did not know the specific role of the brain in the body's functioning, and of course were aware of the heart, it was the thoracic cavity, what today we often refer to as the body's "core," that was the origin

of all human passions, desires, loves, etc. So, to say that the woman is created from the man's rib, from his "core," is to say that she is made of the very same stuff that gives him his worth and value. She is his equal in dignity.

Jesus echoes the words of Genesis when He says, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and the two become...one flesh." In the view of Jesus, in marriage a woman does not become her husband's property, just so that he can continue his family lineage through her. The husband's connection with his family of origin is now less important than the man and woman becoming "one flesh," i.e., the couple entering into a common life, a partnership of equals. What Jesus is doing here is providing a new way of looking at marriage, a way of mutuality, respect and equality, a way that is free of the prerogatives of male dominance and control. In the way that Jesus "redefines" the meaning of marriage: a husband and wife are to strive for the harmony and intimacy that God intended from the very beginning.

Let us pray that we can respond to the vision that Jesus sets before us, recognizing in how many areas we fail to live up to that vision, but asking God's help,, in all the decisions we make in the course of a day, to make that vision more and more a reality.