



October 3, 2021

Twenty-Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the human to be alone." Genesis 2:18

Dear Friends;

In order not to mistakenly interpret the readings, we have to do a little homework. Otherwise we will miss what the sacred authors are trying to say rather than reading into it. We need to understand that Middle Eastern culture always begins with the extended family. This is where one gains their identity, meaning and purpose.

People lived in large family groups, for example Jesus' home village of Nazareth may have consisted of 100-150 people most of who were related by blood or marriage. There is no such thing as the radical individual acting alone. Sons always remained with their father. And their wives and children would be on the same compound along with their brothers' families. Daughters would go to live with their husband's family. The family would occupy a cluster of dwellings under the leadership of the family patriarch. To this day the ideal candidate for marriage is the child of the father's brother. For example Jesus heals the mother-in-law of Peter. Most likely she is not only the mother-in-law of Peter but also was his aunt.

Marriages were arranged by the families, usually by the mothers with the fathers' approval. Just as children cannot choose their parents, so too, children in this culture cannot choose their marriage partners. God chose your parents so God through your parents chooses your marriage partner. This is why Jesus repeats his culture's truism *"What God has joined together, let no one separate."*

A superficial reading of our passage from Genesis may seem to contradict this Middle Eastern cultural practice, *"The man leaves father and mother and clings to his wife."* But one's paternal uncle will be living in the same cluster of dwellings as you. The ideal marriage partner will be living there as well. In this context an unmarried male can leave the actual home of the father and move into his own dwelling with his father's brother's daughter. All the while he still lives in the same complex of dwellings. In his house he will cling to his wife and become one flesh without ever leaving the wider family compound over which the patriarch rules. The wife too enters the groom's father's domain living under the same roof with her father-in-law.

Given the complexity of these family relations in a society that tends towards revenge divorce is a destructive force that not only tears apart an individual couple but the whole extended family and the village. Jesus would be concerned that his small nascent community not be torn apart by destructive divisions and vendettas. So he forbids the idea of divorce.

This concern over the destructive fallout of divorce also would have been the concern of the writer of the Gospel of Mark. But it seems in the early church there were exceptions made to this forbidding of divorce. St Paul allowed a believer who was divorced from a non-believer to remarry a believing Christian. Matthew allowed divorce in the case of adultery. These exceptions are the basis for Orthodox Christians (whose traditions are as old as ours) to permit divorce and remarriage under certain circumstances.

We certainly live in a different cultural context from Jesus and the Gospels. And tragically divorce is a reality that is difficult for all who are involved especially children. A marriage is larger than just two individuals. We are all interconnected. Jesus invites us all to create safe, stable, caring and loving relationships. We will as a society greatly benefit from this.

However, sometimes we as humans fail and some marriages become toxic. Divorce at times is regrettable but necessary. So there needs to be a need a process for healing for the couple, their families and children and the faith community. This process of helping the divorced and remarried to still be participating members of the faith community has been the concern of Pope Francis and the Synod on the Family that met several years ago. The pope has invited us to walk with the divorced and remarried as they heal. God has joined us all together as his people and part of his creation. Let us walk the path of love and wholeness.

Peace,

Fr Ron

Esta carta está en español en el sitio web: www.stannechurchbyron.com