Sermon for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost

October 3, 2021

Mark 10:2-16

In today’s readings, we get to hear a portion of the story of creation that’s found in chapter 2 of Genesis. The lyrical version of chapter 1 gets more attention most of the time. God speaks, big things happen. And God declares them to be good.

But in Genesis 2, the way God operates changes. God is described as being ***literally*** hands on, forming the first human out of the dirt. But then God realizes that there is something about creation that is *not* good. The human is alone.

God creates all the animals, and they’re good. But none of them are suitable for the kind of companionship that God intends for the human to enjoy. The kind of companionship that the human *needs* in order to thrive the way God intends.

So God creates a second human. Not out of the dirt, but out of the side of the first human.

By creating the second human being in such a way, we’re not meant to see anything other than a relationship of two equals. There’s no indication here that one is less than, or subordinate to, the other. They are to help each other, be companions for one another. Be in a relationship with each other. A relationship so close that it is as if they become one being.

Right from the beginning, God’s intent for humanity is to live in a mutually uplifting relationship. But we don’t have to read all that much further in Genesis to see things fall apart.

When the Pharisees talked to Jesus, they were trying to trap him. Which, as we know, never works out well for them. But Jesus made the conversation more about what God’s intent for humanity is, instead of taking the bait.

While it was permissible for a man to issue a certificate of divorce, it was *not* easy for a woman to get out of a relationship. Like a widow, a woman who was divorced was threatened with almost certain poverty. But the divorced woman also carried the burden of the wagging tongues of her neighbors.

So by steering the conversation away from the law and in the direction of God’s intent for creation, Jesus offers us more insight into God’s hopes for human relationships, both those of married couples and, I think, of humanity in general. And those relationships are meant to be built on mutual respect, love, and concern for the dignity and well-being of all involved.

The Pharisees were focused on what Moses had told the people was permissible. And they tended to be focused on the letter of the law.

Each time the Pharisees engaged Jesus in a conversation about a tradition or a part of the Law, Jesus steered them to the bigger picture. And each time that gives us a bit more of an idea of what God values.

Here, it’s about how we treat one another.

Society in Jesus’ day was patriarchal. *Really* patriarchal. Women and children had had few rights. They could be treated as if they were property. Marriage was more like a business transaction. There were contracts. A bride price was paid.

And children were a product of that marriage.

I don’t mean to suggest that all men 2000 years ago were heartless creatures who didn’t care about their families. Far from it. But it’s hard for us today to understand how little say over their lives women and children had.

Men could issue a certificate of divorce for pretty much any reason. There are stories of men being fed up with women who were bad cooks, and divorcing them.

But women in bad relationships had little recourse.

It was an inherently unequal situation. One that did not respect the dignity of the vulnerable.

And Jesus tells the Pharisees that this just isn’t what God intended for human relationships. But because of the “hardness” of the people’s hearts, Moses declared it permissible for a man to divorce his wife.

Jesus changes the conversation from one about the letter of the law, to one about the spirit of the law. It’s God’s will for creation that is important, not what the law permits.

Which isn’t to say that the law isn’t important to Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expanded upon the commandment against murder by saying we shouldn’t even be *angry* with one another. Because even that allows us to violate the *spirit* of the law. To get away from what God intends for creation.

God’s laws are not designed to create ways to punish us. They are designed to create a world where all of God’s good creation can thrive. They insist upon the well-being of the vulnerable, the well-being of the community, being placed before the self-interest of those whose hearts are prone to being hardened.

The commandments against adultery, bearing false witness, murder, and coveting are all about protecting the community from people who have decided that they need more. More control, more power, more things, more status.

Here, by tying divorce to the story of the creation of humans, Jesus reminds us of the reason behind the law of Moses, the *spirit* of the law. And that leads us to God’s intent for creation: God’s desire is for creation to live in harmony, for all of creation to flourish.

But our hearts can become hardened. We can be consumed by our desires, by our anxieties, by our fears.

And God has a commandment about that, too: The Sabbath.

When we faithfully keep the Sabbath, we say ‘no’ to the endless pursuit of more. And we say ‘yes’ to remembering who created us, who redeemed us, who sanctifies us, who forgives us. We say ‘yes’ to honoring our relationships, honoring the dignity of others. We say ‘yes’ to placing the well-being of the community ahead of our self-interest. We say ‘yes’ to protecting those who are vulnerable among us. We say ‘yes’ to peace.

And we say ‘yes’ to allowing God’s love to transform our hearts and minds and wills.

And our relationships.

God loves us so much that God insists we take a step back now and then, give ourselves time to breathe, time to hope, time to reconnect with God and with each other. Time for God to re-create us, re-shape us. Freed from our anxieties and burdens and fears, we can begin to become who God created us to be and encourage others to do likewise.

God gives us one job: to love one another as God loves us. *That* is the spirit behind all of the commandments, behind all of Jesus’ teachings.

May that spirit live in us, now and always.