



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 6, 2024
GENESIS 2:18-24; PSALM 8; HEBREWS 1:1-4, 2:5-12; MARK 10:2-16

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT TEXTS (ON GENDER, ORIENTATION & DIVORCE)

Well, I had planned to write something of a softball sermon on stewardship for today, given that we are now in our annual appeal, but then the lectionary threw us these rather challenging readings about gender roles, marriage and divorce—no softballs here, right?! I feel obliged to address Genesis and the gospel head-on, but maybe we can do so within the context of this cathedral community which has for decades strived to be a place of dignity and respect and welcome for all people.

I will begin by saying that this passage from Genesis carries culturally-laden notions of gender and sexuality present when it was written some 2600 years ago, and we can

trace its origins further back to ancient Mesopotamian creation myths. It is part of our scriptures, but we must always, always interpret the words, not as literal trope to be used as proof-texting bludgeon, but as metaphor, myth, and allegory that lends joy and meaning in our lives today.

There is much to misinterpret here, if taken at face value. There is much beauty to be gleaned if read more deeply. Three Hebrew words can help us sort this out— *ha'adam*, *ish*, and *ishshah*.¹

Ha'adam, best translated as humanity, is derived from the Hebrew word *adamah*, which means dirt, soil, the earth. God forms

¹ <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/genesis/2.htm>

humanity out of the earth. You and I are humus, and to humus shall we return when we die. It's a beautiful image of connection.

The word for individual male human is *ish*, and for individual female human is *ishshah*, but these are not used in the first part of this passage. Elsewhere in Genesis (1:27, 5:2) when it speaks of God creating "man," the word used is not *ish*, but *ha'adam*, humanity—all humanity. This is a story of the human collective. It is our story.

There's this mythic digression about thoracic surgery, taking a rib from *ha'adam*, the human (or humanity), (not *ish*, male human). After that *ish* and *ishshah* are used, but not before. We are all flesh of one flesh, bone of one bone, and we are *ha'adam*, dust of the earth, and from that common root, we then branch out into all the ways we express our humanity.²

And, importantly, when the woman is called to be man's helper, the word used here for helper is the same used for God as helper to humanity, so we would do well not to suggest helper here is a pejorative noun.

I suppose we could just jettison this passage as ancient pablum, but many feminist and queer theologians maintain that to do so gives more power to those who continue to

misappropriate them for their misogynistic and homophobic purposes. Our work is to reclaim them, and unpack them in life-giving ways.

Which brings me to the gospel passage for today in which Jesus is interrogated on the subject of divorce. This, too, has been used as a text of terror to subjugate women and to keep women in stifling and even dangerous relationships.

Again, the passage is culturally situated in First Century Palestine, with all its burdens of unjust treatment of women, but if you mine the text for its deeper meaning, you will find that Jesus is not condemning divorce per se; rather, he is admonishing that hardness of heart is perilous ground on which to stand in relationships of import, and he is condemning the reality that divorce in his time meant the woman was left destitute, often homeless, shamed and outcast. She was left with few options to eke out a survival, and most of those were simply terrible. The admonition comes to us in our time as well.

Then Jesus pivots to marriage (rather than bearing down on divorce), citing the Genesis story in a way that some have interpreted as Jesus prohibiting divorce altogether, or worse, as denunciation of homosexuality given the heteronormative reference.

² <https://margmowczko.com/human-man-woman-genesis-2/>

Scriptures can be proof-texted to justify just about any position.

Let's be clear: Jesus never addressed the matter of sexual orientation anywhere in the gospels, and his reference here was familiar to his audience, and I'd like to think they heard it as a heart-warming reference. Positive, not prescriptive. We have a different understanding of human sexuality—and thankfully a broader one, and we are still learning and unfolding into the fullness of understanding of the beauty of our beings.

Let me also say that I see Jesus' words here, not as pronouncement—thou shalt not..., but rather as a plea—do not let your hardness of heart hurt others. The truth is, friends, marriage is hard work, and sometimes it doesn't work out. That is not a frivolous statement; it is intended as a pastoral one.

Next year this nation will mark the 10th anniversary of the Supreme Court's landmark decision, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, declaring that the 14th Amendment to the Constitution guarantees the right to marry to same-sex couples. They got that one right, even if belatedly. Washington state claimed this right in 2012; Massachusetts was the first state to do so in 2004.

But nearly a decade before that, this cathedral community celebrated the first blessing of a

same-sex union on May 19, 1996. It was not without controversy, to be sure, but I am grateful that those present at the time mustered the courage to say that love, not dogma, is what binds us together in the cosmos of God's grand design.

And I should add that this cathedral let go of its archaic prohibition against divorcees receiving communion in the 1950s. Relationships may die, for any number of reasons, but the Church seems to me to be the one place where all should be welcome, and seen as beloved, even when one's world is turned upside down. Especially when one's world is turned upside down.

So let me say whatever path you are on—single, married, divorced, widowed, whatever your path, whatever your gender, orientation or identity—be gentle with yourself and be gentle with those in your life. Harden not your heart.

And know that this church—this cathedral community—opens its doors and its arms of embrace to you, wherever you are on your spiritual journey.

I'm willing to stake my claim with a God who wants that for us.

I'm willing to stake my claim with a church community who sees one another as helpers on this journey.

Remember that helping is a divine attribute offered to all humanity—ha ‘adam.

And remember that you are created for love.

Genesis 2:18-24 *[The Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.]*

Mark 10:2-16 *[Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.]*



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