

“Something Old, Something New...”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
The Twenty-Seventh Sunday
in Ordinary Time
World Communion Sunday
October 4, 2009
Scripture: Mark 10:2-16

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Lord Jesus, as we hear your Word to us this morning, we ask that you would give us the grace to live our lives in such a way that others might see some of your reaching, seeking, embracing love through us. Amen.*

This morning, while we were still sleeping, Christians in the Democratic Republic of Congo left their homes for places of worship to see their pastors take bread in their hands and declare, “This is my body”. In the Church of the Holy Resurrection in Jerusalem, the words were heard, “This is my body”. In Saint Paul’s in London a hush fell across the congregation as the pastor declared, “This is my body”. In churches and cathedrals across the United States today, pastors take bread into their hands and declare, “This is my body”. In thatched-roof mission stations across the islands of the Pacific this afternoon, the words will be uttered, “This is my body”.

This is World Communion Sunday. Throughout the world, churches of all denominations, in all nations, in many languages, are celebrating the Lord’s Supper. In the midst of a struggling world, we need this time together to remember that our Lord also suffered. And, we need this time to remember that he did so on our behalf. The Lord’s Supper teaches us about the necessity of unity, especially at a time when it seems the world is being torn apart.

A story is told of a head usher in an Episcopal church who went to his pastor with a problem. It seems that despite all of his urgings,

he simply could not get people to stand close enough together at the communion rail. In a frustrated tone, he told the pastor how each time he sent the proper number of people up, but they never seem to fit just right. “Some people leave six to eight inches between them and the person next to them, which crowds up the ones on the very end.” In desperation, he threw up his hands and said, “Can’t people get close together even at communion?” Maybe I need to teach him how to say, “scrooch”, ya think?

If you ask me, getting together and staying together might well be what Jesus was talking about in our gospel lesson this morning. As I am sure you are not surprised to learn, this passage from Mark is one which pastors dread. It’s one of those “unpopular” stories where the pastor pretty much knows he or she is going to upset somebody! And, to be quite honest, that doesn’t feel really good on this World Communion Sunday. After all, here we are on a Sunday when we are hoping that the meal we share will help bring people *together* and we are confronted with a text which talks about people coming *apart*.

I know this is a painful message for many of you. Divorce happens today just as it did in Jesus’ time. I know that there are many of you who have suffered through a divorce and whose suffering has been intensified by being told that divorce is a sin. I also know that we are all aware of the discussion in our society and the church at large about what constitutes a marriage, and what constitutes a family. While many continue to hold that a “family” consists of a father, mother and children, statistics indicate – and I am actually referring here to a study done back in 2001 – that definition of family describes only 25% of households. And I know that right here in this room, no matter what I say about any of this will offend someone. So – yeah – I wish we had a different text today. But...we don’t!

In other sermons, I have shared with you some of the quotes from a book someone gave me which includes quotes from children. I don’t believe I have shared this one with you, though. Kirsten, age 10, was asked, “How does a person decide who to marry?” Her response was, “Nobody really decides who they are going to marry. God decides it all way before, and you get to find out much later who you’re stuck with.” Could it be that simple, do you think?

One day Jesus was in Judea, when a great crowd came to him. In this crowd were Pharisees who decided to step forward and test Jesus. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Now, there was a method to their madness. You see there was a debate which raged among the scholars of Jesus’ time as to how lenient the law should be in regard to divorce. According to some scholars, only adultery would suffice as grounds for divorce. According to other scholars, if your wife burned your toast, that was grounds for divorce. One thing that was accepted universally, though, was that divorce was a man’s option. The men in those days held all the cards.

Jesus responded to this tricky question, as he often did with a question of his own. “What did Moses command you?” he asked.

The Pharisees said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.”

Listen to Jesus’ response: “It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law.” Well, there are plenty of hard hearts still around today. And regardless of what little Kirsten thinks, not every couple can be said to have been joined together by God. Some unions are tragic mistakes. Some people find themselves joined to partners who are abusive, neglectful, or irresponsible. Jesus understands that. Actually, he wasn’t interested in arguing the grounds for divorce with these Pharisees. What he wanted to do was point out to them that

God wanted that this relationship between two responsible adults would be one which allowed respect for one another, love for one another, comfort for one another, and if there were children, that they would be raised to know they are loved and honored and who are taught to love and honor God.

Jesus refused to be bated into a senseless argument. Instead, he reframed the issue from one of legal probability to one of communal integrity. Divorce isn't wrong because it breaks a law, he was saying, but because of the damage it does to those involved. Then he reminded the Pharisees that marriage is not a legal contract, but a spiritual covenant – two individual lives made one by God's divine blessing. Divorce isn't a "sin" in terms of being a wrong act. Divorce happens as a result of the condition of sin, where broken people live broken lives in a broken world. What Jesus did was reach out in the midst of abuse and an unequal patriarchal system to say, "no more – no more shall the weak be abused."

I don't believe it is accidental that immediately following this passage concerning divorce, we hear the story of mothers bringing little children to Jesus. While we do need to be aware that children in Jesus' time were not regarded as innocent or even as individuals – they were "non-entities", best kept out of the way of adults until they arrived at an age of understanding. So when Jesus took the children and blessed them, they were recognized as a part of the excluded or neglected of society, along with women, tax collectors and sinners, lepers and Gentiles – all to whom Jesus reached out.

Two thousand years and sometimes we still miss the point of these stories. *Christ stood for those who could not stand for themselves. He walked on the side of any who would be harmed. God created people to be in relationship. God created people to live in trust and commitment. The reality of life together is that

we so often fall short of how God created us to be. The important word Jesus offers in such circumstances is not issue oriented, but person oriented.

What Jesus is saying in all of this, I think, is that not only is the realm of God being made manifest, but the very nature of God is being demonstrated. God is the one who brings people together. God desires that people who, having once been brought together, ought to stay together. God is the one who refuses to send these "little ones" away.

We normally read this passage as applying to us. I wonder, though, if we might not also read this as a passage as being mostly about God. Maybe we are seeing here the great difference between God and ourselves. We have our limits. We make promises, and with all good intentions, we plan to stay together. But people get sick, people disappoint, people become trapped, addicted, distant, and estranged.

But while we might have our limits, Jesus makes it clear in both stories in our Gospel lesson this morning that God is not like that. God is the one who, from the very beginning, makes union, communion, and togetherness a part of God's world. God is the one who brings individuals together into community. That's how we got the church. God took us as different individuals – many of us quite unlike one another – and has brought us together into communion in the church.

Today is World Communion Sunday. It is a day on which we celebrate our unity in the midst of our diversity. It is a day when we should be fully aware that when we come to this table that our Lord has prepared for us, there is, indeed a great difference between God and ourselves. And yet, he invites us to share the feast which he has prepared. So...let us come – Amen and Amen.

* This story isn't really about divorce. It never really was!

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