



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 20 – Proper 22 Year B

Sacred Mysteries

[RCL]: Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 8; Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

Sometimes we are so familiar with something that we don't even notice it anymore. The little bit from the second chapter of Genesis that we just heard, and that we just heard Jesus quote, is like that. It's so familiar it's invisible. But it is dreadfully important and says some absolutely basic things about our vision of the world and of human life.

Remember the central pronouncement of God in the creation story? Throughout the first chapter of Genesis, God has said one thing about His creation over and over: "God saw that it was good."

But now God looks at all he has made, everything, and says, "It is not good." It is not good that the man – and here "man" means not a male person, but a human being – should be alone.

Think about that. Listen to that. Everything else is good, but this isn't. Notice also that Adam, the human being, was hardly alone in the garden. First of all, God was with Adam in the garden. That's a lot all by itself. Then, when the animals were all done, all of nature, all of creation, was with Adam in the garden. The whole world was there. The man was not alone.

In fact, this sounds like the perfect situation for much of popular American religion – one man alone, surrounded by nature, with God close at hand. How many times have we heard people say that this is really all the religion anyone needs: just me, God, and the great outdoors? Sometimes this is symbolized by a golf course or a trout stream. But when God saw it, when God saw one person, God, and the great outdoors, God didn't say, "It doesn't get any better than this." Instead, God said, about this and only about this: "It is not good".

Creation wasn't finished yet. As long as the man lived in isolation from other people, the creation of a good, a complete, human being, had not yet happened.

It was in order to complete creation, to make a whole human being, that the other person, Eve, is created.

There are a couple of things to notice here. First of all, this story is not as much about the roles of men and women as it is about what it means to be a human being. Also, it is not saying that everyone should be married or that only married people are whole people. That's just not true. After all, Jesus, the perfect image of God, was single. But this is saying that we human beings can only grow into who we are created to be with and through the other – through relationship and community. This growth happens in many ways, but it does not happen alone. If you ask an honest monk where his biggest and most important struggles come from, he'll tell you "other monks." We do not become whole or complete in isolation, but through community, through the "other."

It is to this end that God has given us certain structures and situations in which we can, maybe, begin to discover what it means not to be alone, and where we can have our humanity drawn, and sometimes dragged, out of us. God has given us schools of love, places to grow.

Marriage and families are first of all about this. They are schools of love. And while not everyone is called to the vocation of marriage, for those of us who are, this business of helping one another grow into who we are created to be is one of the primary reasons God created marriage. To be sure, there is more to it than this, but that is primary.

In much the same way, God has called us to be the Church, and he has called us into this church, because without something like this we simply cannot be very Christian, in spite of – or more likely, because of – both the difficulty and the joy other people bring.

One of the central insights of Christianity is that being a part of a real, human, chunk of the body of Christ is essential to any serious Christian growth. Like marriage and family, parish life, church life, is not really about agreement, success, having our needs met, or happiness. Instead it is a school of love. It is about growth into wholeness. That is why, in Church as in families, the real ties that bind are ties of love and circumstances, not of any other sort of homogeneity.

Such growth is simply not possible without commitment to a lifetime of effort and intentionally seeking the grace and help of God. God's intention that marriage be lifelong is not an arbitrary and difficult rule God gives us to make our lives even more difficult. Instead, such intention is a gracious and necessary (if minimal) requirement if a real marriage is even to be possible.

In the same way, our Baptismal vows, which include a commitment to the life of the Christian community wherever we find ourselves, are also for the long haul; for better or worse.

So are life vows in monastic communities and the commitments involved in the other schools of love we are given. These vows are lifelong in intention, because God knows we need at least that long to begin doing what we promise to do.

Sure, there are times when that does not happen. There are sometimes situations in which separation is the only option that contains hope and the possibility of healing. We have all known that reality. People leave churches and find new ones – as most of you know from experience.

And the pain and tragedy of divorce – and the fact that it brings very real possibilities of both destruction and new hope – is, in one form or another, a part of the lives of every one of us. If it hasn't happened to us personally, we have been affected, often deeply affected, by it. These failures of relationship are devastating, and those who hurt need our love, our compassion, and our support.

But there is also an important thing about these experiences, about the times we fall short. We see them as tragic exceptions to the way we know life should be, and the way we want our lives to be. We know that we often miss the mark of our convictions and our beliefs. Yet even in the midst of our failure, we continue to stand firmly for the truth of God's vision of life. Our vows, our marriage vows and our baptismal vows, our ordination vows, these are not for just now, they are not for just when it feels good; they are for life. That is our standard and our goal. We may fall short, but we hold to that standard.

All of this is really to say that, at its heart, marriage is not a convenient human institution for protecting property, regulating sexuality, and safeguarding children. And at its heart, the Church is not a voluntary social convenience for like-minded people to share in an essentially private task.

As ordinary and as unglamorous as they usually are, both marriage and the Church are vastly more than this. They are sacred mysteries, built into creation and into human nature. They are schools of love, gifts of a loving God. For it is not good to be alone; and the only way to goodness, to wholeness, is through commitment, relationship, community, and the grace of God.

This sermon, written by the Rev. James Liggett, originally ran October 8, 2006.