

## **“Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...”**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.*

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Anybody who likes comedy knows that writers can always get some great humor out of stories about marriage. Shakespeare did it. And stand-up comics do it too, with one-liners like Rodney Dangerfield’s classic “*Take my wife... Please!*” Or little jokes such as: “*What’s the difference between a husband and a house cat? —One is a finicky eater who’s impossible to please. . —The other is a furry pet that purrs.*”

We can get some laughs out of marriage situations but marriage is also the major context for a lot of great drama too – from Homer to Sophocles to Shakespeare to Tennessee Williams.

And the reason for this is easy to see: marriage *is the primary human relationship.*

The Bible tells us this at its very beginning. The creation stories in Genesis are wonderfully profound. It’s unfortunate that people often want to disregard them or make jokes out of them because they’re unscientific. These are “mythic” stories, and I mean that in the very best sense. They’re revelations of God’s truth, but not descriptions of phenomena that could be substantiated by archaeology. Beginning with the statement that, “*It isn’t good that the man should be alone,*” we hear how the partnership between man and woman is fundamental. The two have the same nature.

Here’s something interesting: the very first sentence the newly created Adam speaks in the Book of Genesis is the happy recognition of Eve as “*bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.*” And the story draws the following conclusion as a principle of creation: “*Therefore, a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.*”

Notice this: the Bible shows us that there’s no subordination between male and female. There’s only partnership, unity, and sharing. “*Bone of my bones... Flesh of my flesh.*” In the Biblical narrative, subordination of woman to man – which was typical of ancient, patriarchal societies – comes into practice later on, as a result of human sin. This kind of subordination is not portrayed as part of God’s original plan. There’s a lot of bad teaching out there in some conservative churches, asserting that the Bible teaches the subordination of women to men, but that isn’t what we read in the creation story. I read a comment somewhere that said the Genesis story doesn’t intend that the female be subordinate to the male because she was made from his rib any more than it intends that the male be “subordinate” to the soil because he was formed from the earth.

The Genesis story is the basic revelation of God’s truth that Jesus built on when he was confronted by the Pharisees who wanted to trip him up on legal technicalities. You know this part: As Jesus became popular and word of his teachings and miracles spread, members of the ‘Religious Establishment’ decided it was their job to put this carpenter in his place. The Pharisees were the experts. They knew the law. They were the custodians of the sacred traditions of the People of God. They knew God’s will was revealed once for all in the writings of Moses. So they decided to trick Jesus into saying something against the Law. If they could demonstrate that he was blaspheming against the Law, then they could discredit him before the crowds who were hanging on his every word.

So the Pharisees asked him: “Teacher is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” (They knew it was lawful. Deuteronomy said so. The only debating point was the ground for divorce.)

Jesus answered: “What did Moses command you?”

The Pharisees replied: “Moses allowed a husband to divorce his wife as long as the husband drew up the necessary paper work.”

And Jesus answered back: “*Why did Moses allow this? He allowed it because of your hard hearts. But God’s perfect will is revealed in creation where the man and the woman are one flesh.....not two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one else separate.*”

The Law permitted divorce. It still does. But Jesus refused to be tricked into betraying the intent of God. He told them that the Law *permitted* divorce because human beings have hard hearts. We’re sinners. We fall short of God’s dreams for us, God’s ideal for us and for our lives together. It was true then, and it is true now.

Until not long ago, statistics showed that half of all marriages in America end in divorce. That ratio has improved, but only because many more people than ever before have started living together without getting married. The

divorce rate is still high. And why? Because we fall short of God's dreams for us, short of God's intent for what marriage should be. For example: People sometimes marry hastily and for the wrong reasons. Husbands and wives change and grow apart. Couples become cruel to one another and forget they *are* "one bone and one flesh." They begin to destroy their marriages, not conscious that destruction of a marriage is a kind of self-destruction. Some marriages have to end in order to keep the self-destruction from eliminating the possibility of a future life for either partner.

We're human. We're sinners. We fail. But that doesn't change God's plan. God's plan and purpose is for a man and a woman to be life-long partners, "one flesh." Marriage is *meant* to be an indissoluble bond.

The Pharisees wanted to trick Jesus. They wanted to make him say Moses was wrong in permitting divorce. But Jesus didn't say Moses was wrong! He just said that Moses allowed divorce because of men's hard hearts – but divorce was not God's original intent or plan.

People have asked me whether I "believe in divorce." They ask me this because I have been divorced and remarried. They say, "Since you're a priest and you've been divorced and remarried, you must 'believe in divorce.' Right?"

I say, "No. I do not 'believe in divorce.' I believe in Jesus." I think people who have been through a divorce would agree. It's not an easy solution to interpersonal problems. It's radical surgery — the last resort. The bishop of Singapore once asked me whether, since I was a divorced priest, I would recommend divorce as a solution for the troubles of married people who came to me for counseling. I told him that nobody who had ever been through a divorce would be quick to recommend it to anyone else. But there are circumstances when it's the only solution – like radical surgery for cancer.

I believe God intended marriage to be life-long. I believe divorce *always* involves failure, involves sin, and involves terrible human brokenness. But I believe in a God who sent his son into the world to deal with human sin and brokenness — including divorce. I do not "believe in divorce," but I do believe in the forgiveness of sins and in the new life that Christ gives those who turn to him in faith after the grief and pain and "death" that is divorce. Divorce is not the "unforgivable sin."

I speak from personal experience. This isn't something I read in a book. A New Life doesn't come from what we do, but from what Christ does in us – *if we let him*.

You remember the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well in Samaria, found in Chapter 4 of John's gospel? Jesus was thirsty from a long walk when he met a woman at a well, and since she was drawing water from the well he asked her for a drink. She said, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?"

Jesus replied, "If you knew who it was that was asking you for a drink of water, you would ask *him* for a drink, and he would give you living water. ...And that water would become a spring within you, welling up to eternal life."

The woman said, "Oh, give me this water always!" Jesus told her to go get her husband, and she answered, "I have no husband."

Then Jesus said to her, "You told the truth there. You've had five husbands, and the man you're living with now isn't your husband!" He noticed her marital disorder, but he didn't scold her about it. Instead, he offered her new life, new hope. So she believed in Jesus and brought the whole village with her! That's the hope Jesus offers everyone who – in the midst of their human failure and weakness – has turned to him.

The Lord's expectations of us are high, but he picks us up each time we fall, sets us up right on our feet, and says "*Try again!...with me at your side.*" I don't "believe in divorce"; I believe in Jesus!

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*God of creation, when you made us human beings in your image and created male and female to become one flesh in marriage, we know that you didn't expect us to hurt and wound one another. Give those who are married the gifts of tolerance, patience and generosity in their life together. And teach us how to regard those whose marriages are troubled, and those who are suffering through divorce, not with judgment but with compassion and love. Make us more like Jesus, for we pray in his name. Amen.*