

Sermon, Proper 22, 19th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, RCL

Shattered Glass

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

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10/7/2012

Shattered Glass

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.¹

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.² Amen.

In the Jewish tradition, the end of a public wedding ceremony is marked by the breaking of glass, usually a thin glass wrapped in a napkin to contain the fragments. It is smashed under the right foot by the groom. The exact placement of the glass breaking in the ceremony varies; but I understand that in western tradition, and in Jewish wedding ceremonies I have witnessed, the breaking of the glass occurs at the very end. At which time those who have witnessed the ceremony shout **Mazel tov – or congratulations!**

Much has been written about the origin of this tradition and its significance; and there are many interpretations. Among the most popular, breaking the wedding glass is said to be:

- a remembrance of the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem;
- a superstitious ritual: a loud noise thought to drive away evil spirits;
- a reminder that even in times of great joy there is sadness;
- a symbolic consummation of the marriage;
- imagery of the love and relationship embodied in marriage – so fragile that it must be cared for and nurtured lest it be broken;
- a sign of our broken world – and a reminder that although the couple came together as a single union, the world as a whole is broken and needs mending;
- a hope that the newly married couple's happiness and their fruitfulness will be as plentiful as the many shards of broken glass; or
- a warning to the wedding guest not to get drunk and forget themselves at the reception.

There is a joke shared in the Jewish Community that when the groom smashes the glass at the end of the wedding ceremony, it is the last time in the marriage that he gets "to put his foot down."

However, one interpretation, one that resonates most with me, is that breaking the glass is a symbolic break with the past – a representation that the marriage will last as long as the glass remains broken – that is, forever.

¹ Genesis 2:25, NRSV.

² Psalm 19:14

Forever. Wow! Forever; that's a long, long, time.

Today, October 7, 2012, my wife Halina and I are blessed to be able to celebrate 34 years of marriage. Originally we had planned to be at the shore this weekend, but we'll do that next weekend. While we know many people, some in this parish, who have been married for much longer, 34 years is quite a stretch of time. But, as both Halina and I often reflect, while we have shared joys and sorrows, the up times and the down times, in many respects, it seems as though we just got married yesterday.

Originally, I was going to preach two Sunday's ago, but to accommodate scheduling, I agreed to preach today – even before I had a chance to check the lectionary. So, given today's text from Genesis and Mark, my being scheduled to preach this Sunday is what Fr. Malm might describe as a God-incidence.

At first reading, one might presume that today's Gospel – at least the first part of it – is about Jesus' teaching on the subject of divorce. However, I would suggest to you that Jesus' focus is more about shattered glass than divorce.

During the time period that St. Mark is writing about, men and women did not have equal rights in marriage, in divorce, and in a great many things – surprise, surprise. Not by a long shot. According to Jewish law, a husband could divorce his wife, but there was no provision for a wife to divorce her husband. In stark contrast to today's jurisprudence, back then divorce was simple. A husband could divorce his wife for any reason, **ANY reason at all** – at the drop of a hat. It was literally that simple. According to Deuteronomy [24:1], divorce – for husbands – was a very simple do-it-yourself project; no lawyers required.

It is true that the grounds for divorce were heavily debated in the rabbinic world. While the most restrictive interpretation of grounds for divorce would have been limited to adultery, infidelity, or unchastely; the more typical grounds for divorce would have been that your wife did not accept your control. And, refusing to accept one's control was a provision broad enough to cover a great many things. However, inasmuch as the law as stated in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is the only legislation in the Torah regulating divorce, legally a husband could divorce his wife for any reason. That was settled law. Any reason at all: You are unfaithful – **be gone**; you offend me – **get out of here**; you brought me shame – **get out of my sight**; or I find someone else more attractive; **leave**. Even something as trivial as burning the dinner was more than sufficient cause to show her the door.

So, if a man entered into a marriage with a woman and she did not please him because he later finds something – **anything** – objectionable about her, all he needed to do was write her a certificate of divorce, put it in her hand, and send her out the door. Done! Finished! That was that, and that was legal. No courts, no trial, no appeals, no rights (at least none for the woman), no lawyers, no settlement, no alimony, no nothing. Just get a piece of paper, write down your reasons, give your wife her walking papers, and send her packing. So, after the honeymoon, it might have been a good idea for women to get rid of all of the paper and writing instruments in the house.

So, when the Pharisees asked Jesus “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” they were testing him, as they did on many occasions. They knew the law as well as Jesus did. And, like any good lawyer, you don’t ask a question unless you know, **or at least think you know**, the answer.

In asking this question, it is likely that the Pharisees were trying to get Jesus to repudiate the divorce laws as laid down in Deuteronomy, the divorce laws upon which Herod [Antipas] relied to legally divorce his wife and marry his brother’s [Herod Philip] wife, Herodias. If Jesus would say, as John the Baptist told Herod [Antipas], that divorce under such circumstances was **not** legal, the Pharisees reasoned that Jesus would be seen as speaking out against Herod and they could conspire with Herod’s followers to have Jesus suffer John’s fate.

Jesus was a problem for the Pharisees; as his very existence and his teachings were a challenge to their authority and to the status quo. The Pharisees had no real interest in the answer to the question they had posed. They had a different agenda.

But Jesus doesn’t answer the Pharisees’ question; he answers a different question, the **right** question. Instead of discussing the legality of divorce, Jesus answers the more pertinent question: What is God’s will concerning marriage?

The Torah says very little about divorce. In fact, what is written is limited to the first four verses of the 24th Chapter of Deuteronomy. And, this teaching is not directly about divorce, it is about re-marrying a previously divorced wife. It takes divorce for granted and simply describes how a man may legally dismiss his wife if she does not please him or if he finds something objectionable about her. So in answering the question, Jesus refers to that part of Genesis from today’s Old Testament lesson – equating the marriage relationship to blood relationships: declaring that “what God has joined together, let know one separate.”

Another very significant point here is that Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees’ question refers to women and men in equal ways. In contrast to the tradition of the day, by declaring that the joining in marriage is God’s will, Jesus’ answer protects women from the practice of being divorced simply at the whim of the man and the issuance of a certificate of divorce.

At the same time, Jesus’ answer acknowledges that, while divorce and remarriage is not part of God’s plan, because of *hardness of heart* – closed minds that are unwilling to listen or learn from God about nurturing and preserving a union, or the advisability of entering into one in the first place – Moses’ commandment recognizes and provides for those times when the unity of the flesh that God intends breaks apart, or was never firmly established in the first place.

I don’t believe that it is the will of God or Jesus’ teaching that women and men be trapped in abusive, destructive, or truly irreconcilable relationships. So, while the shattered glass is supposed to represent God’s joining, a union that can no more be dissolved than the shards of broken glass can be reassembled; sometimes – after all

has been said and after all has been done – what was supposed to be a special sacred relationship is just shattered glass.

Jesus recognized that sometimes there must be exceptions, even to things held most sacred. For example, although God commanded his people to remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, and to do no work; in Luke – in another response to Pharisees who were trying to trap him – Jesus healed a man with dropsy on the Sabbath. In doing so, he asked the Pharisees, “if one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?” While the Pharisees did not answer Jesus’ question, the right answer – the one Jesus chose – is most assuredly yes.

I am a graduate of the Education for Ministry program and was blessed to have Lorna Worley as a mentor. One of the staples of that program was spiritual reflections. To be honest, at first I found spiritual reflections to be a very long and arduous path to discernment. However, I came to appreciate the value of this approach to discernment, because while sometimes messy and time consuming, the process was one of discernment in community. And, one of the things that Lorna reminded us of consistently is that discernment works best when it is done in community. Many minds, many hearts, many prayers united in discernment are far better than only one. Frankly, while I am not sure I could have given voice to it at the time, this approach to discernment and the full participation of the laity in virtually every aspect of life in the Church is among the things that drew me to the Episcopal Church.

We are not in it alone, and discernment is not reserved solely to the episcopate or presbyters. We, all of us, the People of God, do discernment in community. For example:

- at the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, we, the People of God, promise to do all in our power to support these persons in their life in Christ.
- at the Ordination of Deacons and Priests, we, the People of God, are asked if we know of any “impediment or crime because of which we should not proceed...” and, again we, the People of God, promise to uphold the ordinand in their ministry; and
- at the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, we, the People of God, promise to do all in our power to uphold these two persons in their marriage.

In our Church, with respect to the sacraments and many other important things, we discern in community. Sometimes doing so is messy and takes time, but we discern in community.

In the Episcopal Church and other faith communities, those who would be married meet with the clergy for pre-marital counseling – discernment. This is not a process whereby the clergy conduct a hearing and pass judgment on whether or not the couple is fit to be married, rather it is a *speed-bump* of sorts – an opportunity for the couple to engage in a guided exploration and understanding of themselves, one another, their faith in practice, the nature of the commitment on which they are about to embark, and what it means to be married.

Sometimes, however, with or without pre-marital counseling, relationships break and marriages fail. There are many reasons, which Jesus places under the heading: hardness of heart. But, by the Grace of God, there is a path to redemption.

Nevertheless, it is the will of God that what God has joined together not be torn apart. So, I would charge myself, my wife, and all of us who are or will be in a sacred relationship with another to remember St. Paul's words to the people of Corinth concerning the Gift of Love. St. Paul said:

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.*³

May God grant each of us who have or will be joined together in a sacred relationship the wisdom to understand fully and share completely God's love and to live together forever in unity and harmony. What God has joined together, let no one separate.

Mazel tov!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³ 1 Corinthians 13:4-8