

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 4, 2015 * World Communion
Pilgrimage to the Manger
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Mark 10:2-12

REFLECTION

“...though modern Marriage is a tremendous laboratory, its members are often utterly without preparation for the partnership function. How much agony and remorse and failure could have been avoided if there had been at least some rudimentary learning before they entered the partnership....And that statement is equally valid for all relationships.”

— Leo Buscaglia, Loving Each Other (1924-1998)

Dr. Felice Leonardo Buscaglia Ph.D. was a professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Southern California. He was a graduate of Theodore Roosevelt High School (Los Angeles).

“The language of marriage is often a language of ownership, not a language of partnership.”

— Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nigerian author (b.1977)

Partners for the Journey

Already there are Christmas decorations – mixed with a few pumpkins – in department stores. The barrage of Christmas advertisements has begun on t.v. My dental hygienist has already finished her Christmas shopping. So I’m giving up. I’m heading to Bethlehem.

Joe and I are going to work together from now until Christmas on the idea that we are on a pilgrimage to the manger. Each week I will see what the lectionary text has to offer in terms of advice for the journey – if any – and share that with you. October’s texts have already indicated that we need to think about who will be our partners along the way, what we need to pack or unpack for this particular trip – and how we might discern which way to go, which path or road to take.

Today’s text has to do with marriage – partnership of the most intimate nature. It is a text often quoted to argue against the option of divorce – and to support the belief that God and Jesus only sanction heterosexual marriage. So it will be important to define terms and interpret this text in context before getting underway.

These words are recorded both as a challenge from Jewish legal authorities – and as questions from his closest followers. Jesus answers the challenge by using the

Socratic – and very rabbinical – method of responding to a question with a question. It is also understood by rabbinical scholars that every text has at least 77 interpretations. In reading this text we do a disservice to Jesus and his methods if we take it literally – and neglect to hear and respond with the questions it raises – let alone search for at least 77 interpretations.

In the time and cultural context that Jesus was sojourning among us, the modern concept of natural, mutual love between persons of the same sex did not exist as a socially acceptable model. There is no word for “homosexuality” as we define it now in Hebrew or Greek. You will find modern English translations that use the word “homosexuality” – but that is an interpretive translation of words – often in vice lists – that actually mean things like “men who wear soft clothing,” “men who take the woman’s role in sex” and “older men who have sex with young boys” (presumably as mentors and teachers, though, as we now understand it, this would be considered pedophilia).

There were, undoubtedly, loving, same sex relationships. King David and Jonathan loved each other. One of Jesus’ followers, possibly John son of Zebedee, was referred to as the “beloved disciple.” But such relationships were not included in descriptions of households or families. Therefore, it was unheard of that such a relationship might be a sanctioned, blessed union. That is why this text – written as the words of Jesus – refers only to heterosexual marriage. The reference is to marriage as people of that time – and, apparently Jesus - understood it. In new times and contexts this text opens to new interpretations.

In the time and cultural context that Jesus lived, a Jewish man could divorce his wife, but the wife had no right to divorce her husband. This understanding is supported by seven references in the Hebrew Scriptures in which a husband can unilaterally give his wife a bill of divorce or “*get*.” There are no references to a woman giving her husband such a bill.

According to the Talmud [written before, during and after the life of Jesus], only the husband can initiate a divorce, and the wife cannot prevent him from divorcing her. Later rabbinical authorities took steps to ease the harshness of these rules by prohibiting a man from divorcing a woman without her consent. In addition, a rabbinical court can compel a husband to divorce his wife under certain circumstances: when he is physically repulsive because of some medical condition or other characteristic, when he violates or neglects his marital obligations (food, clothing and sexual intercourse), or, according to some views, when there is sexual incompatibility.

<http://www.jewfaq.org/divorce.htm>

Another online source suggested that a woman can also make living with her a living “hell” so that her husband will initiate divorce. Interesting social commentary there.

In Mark 10:11-12, Jesus is recorded as saying that **neither** spouse can divorce the other; he indicates that the wife and husband have equal agency – overturning the social understanding. That’s our Jesus!

The other reason Jesus may have discouraged divorce - making this is more a merciful statement than an inhumane prohibition – was to protect women from abandonment. Women of the time were dependent on men for food, clothing, shelter, financial security, physical safety. By stating a moral impediment to divorce, Jesus was heading off destitution, homelessness, an endless list of perils for women. It was not – as some anti-divorce proponents would tell us – meant to trap women in abusive marriages. In our time – with the understandings and resources available to battered women – it is unmerciful and abusive to suggest women stay when their bodies, souls, lives are in danger. Such interpretations turn a word of mercy into a death trap.

One more thing to note. Marriages in ancient Judaism were usually negotiated between families – arranged but not necessarily coerced. Compatibility and consent of the parties were certainly elements of the discussion. There are statistics that indicate that cultures that continue to practice “arranged marriage” have significantly lower divorce rates. And I’ve heard it said by a person in such a culture and marriage, “We love the one we’ve married rather than marry the one we love.” This avoids the trap of marrying in the throes of hormonal attraction – and allows for actually researching compatibility and shared values before entering into eternal partnership.

So what does all of this say about our pilgrimage and our partners in this endeavor – in our own time and culture?

First – we can acknowledge that we have many more choices than our ancestors – about who our partner, significant other, spouse will be. Sexual orientation is now a much more openly acceptable category for determining one’s spousal choice. Religion, race and social class are no longer absolute in determining who is qualified or compatible.

And – knowing we are not “trapped” in our marriage – that there are civil and reasonable ways to renegotiate the terms – even nullify the contract – allows more emotional room to make choices – to stay in order to work things out rather than stay because we have to.

Second – our time and culture acknowledges that healthy relationships are established and maintained through good communication and some foundational social skills. Self-regulation, anger management, empathy, self-awareness, and some facility with the language of feelings are necessary if a marriage is to work out. Classes, counseling and self-help books are resources available to us – not so much for ancient couples. And knowing that marriage is not just a one-time exchange of vows – but a decision made every day to care for another person to the best of our ability – that love is not a feeling but an action – can make a difference in the quality and longevity of the contract.

I want to note here that these same things – especially empathy – are what are lacking in our society as a whole – which is part of what has led to our American culture of mass shootings. An article being shared on social media right now, I think, has something important to say about this:

Gun control gets the headlines. Mental health care gets the headlines. Violence and video games and misogyny and internet forums and atheism — the list is endless at this point.

Here's what doesn't get the headlines: Empathy. Listening to those around you. Even if you don't like them very much. We have come to live in a culture where it's taboo or unacceptable to simply check in with people emotionally and offer some empathy and understanding. I'm not saying this would magically fix all gun violence. I'm just saying that all of these things — the lack of gun laws, the lack of health care, the inability to have basic conversations with friends and neighbors about what's going on with them, these are all extensions of a callous and self-absorbed culture that lacks any real empathy.

Despite being relevant and important discussions, the glamorous headlines are ultimately distractions — they just feed into the carnage and the attention and the fame the killer desired. They are distractions from what is right in front of you and me and the victims of tomorrow's shooting: people who need help. And while we're all fighting over whose pet cause is more right and more true and more noble, there's likely another young man out there, maybe suicidally depressed, maybe paranoid and delusional, maybe a psychopath, and he's researching guns and bombs and mapping out schools and recording videos and thinking every day about the anger and hate he feels for this world.

And no one is paying attention to him.

<http://markmanson.net/school-shootings>

Paying attention to one another. This is key to healthy relationships with our fellow-travellers.

Third – it is now recognized that openness and authenticity are essential to long-term partnerships. Transparency from the beginning – stating out loud our expectations around work and child-bearing and raising, money and the ways we wish to live out our values, health issues and life goals – pre-marital discussion is a relatively new and valuable practice in human existence.

Just as an adopted child is healthier if the circumstances of adoption are known and grappled with, the terms of a marriage partnership are stronger and more likely to last if everything is on the table from the start.

If, on this pilgrimage, one partner is expecting to camp out in a tent and cook meals on an open fire – and the other is expecting to stay in hotels with room service – you can see that one or both will end up solo on the road.

That does not mean we end up ALONE on the road. Marriage is not the only partnership we might choose or encounter on the way. But all of the above holds true for friendships and a variety of alliances engage in throughout our lives.

Choices, skills, transparency – and – fourth, reliance on That Which is Larger Than Ourselves. What we do have in common with our ancestors in faith is a realization that we don't do anything on our own. There are forces – both social and cosmic – that are larger than any one or two or nine people. It takes a Village to raise a child – and a Village – maybe the same one – to sustain a partnership, friendship or business venture.

And, since we're talking about Pilgrimage, I suppose we ought to call it a Caravan rather than a Village.

And it takes much more than human initiative, not to mention numerous camels and a ton of provisions, to sustain a Caravan.

Pilgrimage – in the first place – is a sacred journey – with The Holy set as a destination. And, as we know from our stories about exodus and the wilderness years, G-d doesn't reside in one place and is not just a destination.

G-d accompanies – The Holy is on the journey with us.

So, if human marriages and partnerships, friendships and alliances do not hold together for the entire journey –

we still have the presence and resources and comfort and encouragement and annoying enthusiasm and goading and power of

The One Who Made Us, Loves Us and Refuses to Abandon Us.

If we choose one or more partners to travel with us on our pilgrimage – we have the option of choosing consciously and wisely – with transparency and a commitment to daily negotiations.

If we choose – or end up – making this pilgrimage solo – we are still not alone. We are in a caravan of interdependent fellow-travelers. We have each other. And we have a G-d who cares about our well-being and never leaves us. Ever.

Scripture Reading for Sunday October 4, 2015 – Pentecost 19

Mark 10:2-12

2 Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" 3 He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" 4 They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." 5 But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 6 But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 7 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, 8 and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

10 Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11 He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; 12 and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."