

Year B Proper 22
Genesis 2:18-24
Psalm 8
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16
Cynthia Knapp
Oct. 7, 2018

Whenever I meet with a young couple preparing for marriage I am struck with an almost overwhelming sense of responsibility. I know how easily the stresses of this world can impact a marriage. There they sit, eagerly anticipating a wonderful life together of marital bliss fully expecting that their love for one another can conquer all, not realizing all that they will be up against and how it can eat away at even the best of relationships. I am all too aware of the importance of helping them develop the tools they will need to safely and successfully navigate those waters that I know from my own life experience are not easy to navigate. They will need to be able to withstand the onslaught of countless kinds of stress and strain on their relationship over the years and yet to have their relationship strengthen and grow rather than weaken and erode. They will need tools for healthy communication, they will need to talk about and think through certain things they might not have addressed, to learn to honor and appreciate one another, and to

operate as a team rather than as individuals. But most critical of all, they need to learn to root their relationship in a faithful walk with the Lord. The single most important thing I can do is to help them develop their faith in God individually and as a couple and to learn to come to the Lord together in prayer. It's the best insurance for a happy and healthy marriage. It's not something that can be accomplished in three premarital counseling sessions so I encourage any couple that is going to be married to do the Alpha course together to take that time to launch a journey of growing together in their faith. In doing so they will build a strong foundation for their marriage and deepen their love for one another making the good times even better and preparing their relationship to withstand life's storms, and the wear and tear of time.

Can you imagine if instead I were to say to them, "Look marriage can be really hard and the majority of marriages eventually end up in divorce so, just in case you don't make it, here's the name and number

of a good divorce lawyer.” They would be horrified and rightly so! I would be setting them up for failure before they even begin their life together. We don’t lower our standard for marriage because some marriages fail. The standard for marriage is a life-long commitment that stands firm in the face of hardship and the onslaught of adversaries. It is a covenant relationship that demands all we’ve got, to defend it. The principle that the best offence is a good defense is true of marriage as well and our best defense is the protection that is provided when two people are seeking to honor and glorify God in their lives individually and together. In submitting themselves to the Lord, he is creating a hedge of protection around their relationship and placing a firm foundation beneath their feet to withstand the difficult times.

In the time of Jesus divorce was quite common especially among the Romans who lacked the kind of governing principle that the Jewish law provided. But even among the Jewish rabbinic teaching, there were two schools of thought. One was that a man could only divorce his wife in the case of infidelity. The other was that a man could divorce his wife if she did absolutely anything to displease him without the ruling of any court or judicial figure. He could simply put her out and declare himself divorced. There were no

schools of thought that allowed a woman to divorce her husband on any grounds, and opportunities to make a living for a woman were few and far between and often quite undesirable. The writing of a certificate of divorce that Moses had allowed was actually to protect the women from abuses of this covenant relationship and to give them legal documentation that they were free to marry again.

In the encounter of Jesus with the Pharisees, Jesus has just crossed over from Galilee to the East of the Jordan River into the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas. Herod had married his wife, Herodias, after he persuaded to leave her husband Herod Philip, his half brother, while he was visiting them in Rome. Marrying your husband’s brother while your husband was still living was strictly forbidden under any school of thought in Mosaic Law. John the Baptist was outspoken in his criticism of this marriage and has just been beheaded for it. So the question posed to Jesus by the Pharisees is really a set-up. But Jesus is undeterred. Sin introduces chaos and trouble into our lives and Jesus was not going to lower the standard out of fear of Herod. Instead he reminds them of the covenant nature of marriage as it was ordained by God. “What God has joined together, let no one separate.”

He is not being hard hearted in upholding this standard. He is calling

us to live into the wholeness and happiness that is a reflection of the Kingdom of God as we will one day experience it in heaven.

What seems to be a disconnected piece of the story is actually the key to living into the standard Jesus has laid before us. When Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me, for to such as these belongs the kingdom of God." He is using a teaching technique called "stringing pearls" that was a teaching tool of the rabbis and something that was discussed in the Adult Sunday School class last week. It is a technique of using a scripture or a piece of scripture that calls to mind another scripture that provides an important piece to understanding the whole picture. It is only in putting together the different scriptures that are hinted at but not fully provided that the full meaning is revealed. For those of you who love mysteries that require collecting all the evidence to crack the case, this is right up your alley. We learn something better when we have to wrestle with the meaning and figure it out for ourselves to understand. In this case, when Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, for it is to such as these that the children of God belongs." those who were listening would have thought of Psalm 8 verse 2. "From the mouths of infants and children you have established strength, or you have ordained perfect praise, because of your

adversaries to make the enemy and the vengeful cease." In the Hebrew the meaning is much more clear. The prayers and praises of the infants and children, the weakest of all, are laying the foundation for the bulwark that will be the defense against the enemy. The enemy is not an individual but many. It is God who will win the battle against the foe when we but seek to praise and glorify him.

David has come to the discovery of this spiritual principal after fleeing from those who would kill him even though he knows he has been anointed and chosen as king. Psalms 3-7 are all praying for deliverance from his enemies. He is fleeing for his life and overwhelmed by the constant struggle. But in Psalm 8 he seems to come out into a place of hopefulness and faith in God to deliver him. He begins and ends the Psalm with praising God. "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. You have displayed your splendor above the heavens! You have built a stronghold against your adversaries through the praises of infants and children." In other words, God wins the battle for us but the battle turns in our favor against the enemy when we seek to continually praise and glorify God.

The battle is won in our mind and in our heart and on our knees when we seek first the Lord and allow him to defeat the enemy. Paul puts it this

way in 1 Corinthians 4:7 “We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” This is what makes a marriage great-- it is when we continually seek to love one another as Christ loved us; when we are together humbled before the Lord and seek his guidance, his mercy, and his grace in our lives together.

Our enemies are usually not flesh and blood enemies like the ones who sought to take David’s life. The things that seek to destroy us or to destroy a marriage are things like suspicion and despair, fear and insecurity, anxiety over what might be, a lack of appreciation for what we have leading to a desire for something we don’t have. These battles tend to begin in our own minds. When Jesus is Lord in our lives, we invite him to be the governor over our thought life. As our translation of the Psalm says, “O Lord, our governor, how majestic is your name in all the earth.”

Our hope for the future is in who we are in Christ, and in what God can do for and in us, rather than having our identity and our hope entirely dependent on another other person. This frees us to enjoy our relationship without putting the pressure on it to be something it is not meant to be. Marriage is a partnership to kneel together before the Lord. When we keep our minds set on Jesus we are protected from allowing the enemy

to get a foothold in our thoughts or in our relationship. We know we are loved and cherished just as we are, with all our weaknesses and failures, we know that our future and our hope rests in the one who is clothed in majesty, who reigns over heaven and earth, and who died that we might be set free to live into the fullness of the love of God in which we were meant to live as a foretaste of what we will experience in heaven. Amen