

Homily 19th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 22 - Year B
Christ Episcopal Church
Towanda, Pa.
Rev. Betsy Welliver Sentigar
Oct 3 2021
Mark 10: 2-16

Come Holy Spirit and enkindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created and You shall renew the face of the earth. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Today's lesson is what I call one of the hard lessons. As a fledgling clergy person, I did not have the foresight or experiential knowledge to contemplate cutting out this reading on divorce. A wise preacher advised: "If this scripture is read in your church, you should preach on it...and good luck". In prayer, I recognized the need to be vulnerable and personal. Let our healing continue....

My mother Ann died when I was age 7. This was a sudden death from an aneurysm. She left my father widowed with 7 children ages 3 to 15. As a widow, he found himself , after an appropriate but necessarily expedited time thanks to his sister, in love with a divorced woman. Said "woman", had suffered in the 60's as an outcast due to her divorce. She had entered her first marriage in good faith. Her situation was that her husband

suffered what we now call severe PTSD which left her concerned for her children's and her welfare. I hear stories from my step siblings how she was ostracized in community as her financial and emotional life deteriorated. My dad and first mother as friends, offered compassion through hospitable friendship and financial help. These stories warm my heart.

After my mom Ann's death, I was fortunate enough to have Nancy Blanche Hollands as my new mom. In she came, brave, courageous, broken, financially destitute ,hopeful and in love with this widower of 7. Together, they would create a new household of 9 which turned into 10...wow! Not easy and complicated by the fact that Ann's sudden death and her own divorce (6 years prior) were taboo subjects at the family dinner table, the one place where we would gather. The "elephant" in the room ,was in fact in every room at our house , 18 rooms in fact, to include the 5 bathrooms. She offered love, support, structure and the necessary discipline for all of us the very best way she knew how.

One thing that hurt Nancy in particular back then in Christmas season (1964), was that she and my dad Art could not be married in the church. This was forbidden at that time. Yes, it was the Episcopal Church. Yes that

was canonically correct at that time. She and my dad who was a faithful vestry man were tremendously hurt by this. For you see my friends, my father never missed a Sunday getting all of us to church. I could never figure out how he did that as a single parent of 7. Sunday mornings were not pretty to say the least. And yet, he committed his time, talent and treasure faithfully.

Our new priest Sam and his wife Jessie came over and married them in our home with a few close relatives and friends. It was touching and memorable. As kids we had a fair measure of anxiety over what the future would bring.

However, for many years, it left my step mom, understandably, angry at the church. She didn't attend. Part of that reason could have been the simple logistics of caring for all 10 of us. Part could be her anger and hurt of being ostracized. I'm sure it partly stemmed from both of these factors.

Later in life , as a widow, she came into the church with a sense of feistiness and full on engagement. Y'all who are on altar guild would know of what I speak! Together my mom Nancy and I would have many

conversations of the church, yet I never asked what drew her back in, how the Spirit of God touched and anchored her heart in the pew and community. Perhaps it was losing the love of her life Art, age 52, after a short marriage of 13 years. Life again for her and all of us changed abruptly.

She even was on the search committee for a new priest who would serve many years an amazing source to many including me during several tragedies in my life. In her last years of she found acceptance, purpose and meaning in church community. Her own faith was burgeoning only to abruptly be cut short in 1998 in a tragic car accident.

For some people marriage does not work out. Their intentions may be good, but due to complex factors the marriage dies. In good faith, they enter into the sacrament of marriage. The Episcopal Church does not use the language of annulment (ie as in the RC Church) that there was never an authentic marriage there in the first place⁴. Instead, our tradition takes the view that people can make every effort, but find that the complexity of living the marriage becomes increasingly destructive on all the parties involved.

At this point, the Episcopal Church recognizes that God can take tragic and hard situations and transform them into situations of grace and hope.

Therefore grounded in our confidence about the agency of God to create a new chance for monogamous and committed relationship to be granted to divorced persons who are divorced persons, the Episcopal Church allows persons to remarry, if they so choose, and live a full life within the church.¹

Jesus was pursuing his way south soon to be entering Jerusalem in the final days of his crucifixion.

The Pharisees came again to perhaps test his orthodoxy on rabbinical law. Herein the question was about divorce. At that time, it was a crux of Rabbinic discussion; they well may have wanted his opinion on it or they may have been hoping that he would contradict himself in order to formulate a charge of heresy against him.²

Jewish ideals of marriage were held in highest esteem and considered the greatest of all virtues.

¹ Ian S. Markham & C.K. Robertson *Episcopal Questions, Episcopal Answers - Sharing Christian Faith.* pg. 45

² William Barclay *The Gospel of Mark The New Daily Study Bible* pgs 275-6.

What impairs this virtue is that in Jewish law, a woman was regarded as a thing. She had no legal rights but was at the complete disposal of the male head of the family. In Mark 10:9, Jesus declares” Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. “For Jesus, the kingdom of God was unfolding, (“the kingdom of God has come near Mark 1:15)...and this meant that everything was changing.³ He says this as he also understands the law of Moses and the texts of Deuteronomy in the context of this question.

Jesus had a pastoral concern for women who could have their lives torn apart by a signature on a piece of paper. In the kingdom of God, there should be mutual respect and concern for each other. Relationships could work if each party approached the other with mutual respect and concern. Abuse and neglect are often substituted for respect and concern. We know understand this to go both ways. In our broken world, divorce is sometimes necessary. In a family of 10, mine has a divorce rate of 50%. Much has been observed and learned in marital relationships. What I am sure of is that we absolutely cannot judge what we cannot know of another’s journey.

³ David Howell *Feasting on the Word Year B. Vol 4. Location 5007-5055.*

In the larger lectionary passage, the disciples ask him again about this same matter which increases the tension between Jesus and the disciples. As he teaches them (and by extension us) they do not get it. Perhaps Jesus is saying “In the Kingdom it is not about what is permissible, but what is ethical. Maybe if we can receive the kingdom like a child we will get it. God is not looking for condemnation. She is looking for life sustenance, for life giving relationships and ultimately for the flourishing of life in every person. May this be so in each of our journeys in the complexity of our humanity.

Today’s teaching directs us to become like a child ...Take a few moments and settle in. Close your eyes and imagine a scene where Jesus holds you as a baby. You are cuddled and secure in his arms. Be fully in this scene. Sense the touch, the love, the desire in your relationship with Jesus. I will take us out in this prayer. Remain in the space. Return again as you need to anytime and anywhere...

May we remember dear God, that we belong in your arms.

It is there that we are healed, and there that we are whole.

May our impurities be cast from our minds, hearts and bodies.

May every fiber of our being be filled with your light.

May our cells vibrate with your divine energy.

May our bodies and souls radiate your love.

You are the divine physician.

In you we trust.

We accept your will for us in our lives.

We accept your healing.

We accept your love.

We accept ourselves.

Amen. ⁴

⁴ Elizabeth Rankin Getz, Marjorie A. Burke, Ann Smith *Women's Uncommon Prayers - Our Lives Revealed, Nurtured, Celebrated*. Morehouse Publishing