

27th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Jesus Defines Marriage”

Fr. Frank Schuster

This is a dreaded weekend for a lot of preachers in our culture because the definition of marriage is loaded with a lot of emotion in our day and age. So please pray for me as I do my best to be true to the scriptures today and know that if any of you end up disagreeing with me that I will still love you. Deal? Let's begin with how important the institution of marriage is for Jesus. Consider that his first miraculous sign in the Gospel of John was at a wedding, in Cana, at the request of his mother no less. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus frequently refers to himself as the bridegroom and the new Israel, the Church, as his bride. Jesus refers to heaven as a marriage banquet on a number of occasions. In today's Gospel, Jesus reverses the Law of Moses, elevating the institution of marriage to a higher solemnity than was ever present before in a very counter cultural way. My perspective is, if we worship the Son of God, if we call ourselves disciples of Jesus, we should then listen to what he has to say, even if what Jesus has to say is counter cultural, even if this means we must struggle with what he says sometimes. As we see in the Gospel reading, both the Pharisees and the disciples themselves struggle with what Jesus has to say about marriage.

And as I was praying about this Gospel reading this weekend, the thought that came to my mind was how many words we use in our language that have totally different meanings. I was taking a walk on a trail nearby here and as I was admiring the trees the word “trunk” came to mind. The word “trunk” can mean the main body of a tree from the ground to the branches but the word can also mean a big compartment on the back of most people's car. The next thought were my arms swinging back and forth from my “trunk” which can also mean my torso and realized that the word “arms” can also mean weapons, a totally different definition in my mind which puzzled me. After all, most weapons are held in one's hands so how did they become arms? That evening, I decided to make soup in my kitchen so I took out a pot and placed it on the stove. The word “pot” has several meanings too. It can mean the cookware I was using, or it could mean the stack of chips on a poker table or it can mean something that people smoke and was, until somewhat recently, an illegal substance in our state. And the way we use words can change dramatically, even within a generation. When I was in college, if you asked me to “google” something, I would have stared at you as if you had two heads. And, I would have had no idea what an “emoji” was either. I mention this because I think a way of understanding Jesus' thoughts on marriage is to realize that Jesus' definition of marriage was different than the definition of marriage that the people he was talking to had in our Gospel reading and much more different than our culture's definition of marriage today. Fair enough?

In our culture, marriage is between two people who publically declare their love for each other and desire to make their love for each other exclusive and permanent. This allows anyone regardless of gender to enter into this civil definition of marriage, which also by law allows them to share in important employer benefits such as medical insurance, next of kin rights, and the list goes on. These benefits are not trivial and so the voters several years back decided in a spirit of fairness to vote in favor of this new definition. As a result, the state's wedding forms nowadays have changed the people's names from male and female, husband and wife, to "Person A" and "Person B" so to be inclusive of all. After I sign these documents with couples after a wedding, I am sometimes tempted to say, "And now I pronounce you Person A and Person B." Meanwhile, as you all know, in our culture there has for a long time been a recognition that marriages can often times not work out in the end and so the recourse to divorce is almost always available. Suffice to say, the definition of marriage our culture operates from is not the definition of marriage Jesus is operating from. The culture and the bible may use the same word, but the meaning of the word is quite different. They are completely different ideas, as we can see in our readings this Sunday.

Our first reading from Genesis is commonly misunderstood. Genesis isn't trying to give a recorded history of how the genders were created at the beginning of time. Genesis is giving us a divinely inspired and poetic perspective on what it means to be human in the image and likeness of God. You see, in the chapter preceding this reading, God creates the human person in God's image and likeness, male and female God created them. This statement from the first chapter of Genesis suggests that the image and likeness of God is incomplete without men and women together. Our first reading from the second chapter of Genesis, which comes from a separate ancient tradition than the first chapter, nevertheless continues this theme with the story of Adam's rib. When Adam meets Eve, he says, "This one, at last, is bone from my bones and flesh of my flesh." Our reading concludes with the statement, "This is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh." The divinely inspired message is this: the image and likeness of God is incomplete without both man and woman. In the first chapters of the ancient book of Genesis, we have the origin of the institution of marriage as Jesus envisions.

In our Gospel reading from St. Mark, we have Jesus' clear teaching on what he means by the word marriage, and everyone is upset with him, and the controversy continues to the present day in a variety of ways. The Pharisees approach Jesus and ask, "Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?" They were testing him. Jesus said in reply, "What did Moses command you?" The Pharisees reply, "Moses permitted a husband to write a bill of divorce and dismiss her." Jesus tells them, "Because of the hardness of your hearts he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate."

The Pharisees are not happy with this answer. Even the disciples are not happy. In the house the disciples again questioned Jesus about this. Jesus responds with remarkable clarity, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” In St. Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus clarifies this statement with the caveat, “...unless the marriage is unlawful”, indicating that marriage vows can at times be defective as in the case of a couple who shouldn’t have gotten married in the first place. This is why the Catholic Church has an annulment ministry, which I help people with by the way, which is taken very seriously because of the Son of God’s understanding about the institution of marriage.

So far we have seen Jesus define marriage to be a life-long and exclusive union between a man and a woman, what happens next? Jesus says, “Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” So, for the Son of God whom we worship, marriage is not only a life-long and exclusive union between a man and woman who are free to marry, marriage is also at the core of its definition open to procreation and new life. This obviously doesn’t mean every marriage will produce children, but at the heart of marriage is the hope and openness to procreation. Again, the perspective here is ancient that dates back to the opening chapters of Genesis. When the image and likeness of God our Creator is whole in the union of man and woman, the power of creation itself is unleashed. And, this is beautiful when you take a moment to reflect on it. It is beautiful.

What does this mean for us today living in a culture that has a different definition of marriage than what Jesus proclaimed? We all know someone who is divorced and remarried. We all know someone who is in a same sex marriage. We all know people who feel called to live out their discipleship as a person who is single, who do not feel called to married life or religious life. What is my attitude as a pastor? Let’s love them all, period! Don’t ostracize or alienate anyone, love them all, welcome them all. All are welcome here, end of story! Everyone is welcome at our parish, regardless of how our lives have shaped out, because Jesus loves us all and Jesus loves you as he continually calls us all to a higher level of discipleship, in whatever manner of life he has called us to. Jesus calls us all to a conversion of heart and we all fall short, my friends, we all do. As we have seen in Technicolor lately, even priests, bishops and cardinals fail miserably at times too and need to be challenged by the Gospel as well. All of us need to hear what Jesus has to say to us, even when we are challenged at times with his words. All of us. This is because, as a pastor, I am acutely aware that my “words” or “definitions” do not have the power to save anyone. Only the words that come forth from the mouth of Jesus have the power to save us. And this gives me peace because Jesus alone is the way, the truth and the life.