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Holy Divorce?

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Texts: Genesis 2:18–24; Mark 10:2–16 (B–Proper 27)

There is a lot of talk these days about the Internet and the “information highway”, in which a great lot of people with personal computers are hooked up to even larger computers all connected to each other through telephone lines. I am, as they say, “online”, which gives me access to an incredible variety and quantity of information, access to on-line discussion groups, electronic bulletin boards, mailboxes, and so on. One of the discussion groups to which I belong is one which focuses exclusively on issues of worship and liturgy; we discuss ceremonial, historical evolution of worship forms, theology of worship, amongst other things, and last week there was a rather vigorous discussion extending over several days regarding one person's request for Christian divorce liturgies.

Now to some people, talk of the church having a ceremony of divorce is absurd, ridiculous in the extreme, and an example of just how far the church is willing to go to conform to secular society. After all, Jesus expressly forbade it, did he not? Is that not what today's Gospel reading is all about? I think that if we take it only at first glance we would think that the Bible teaches that divorce and remarriage are absolutely sinful and forbidden in all cases. It has certainly been used this way. And it is obvious that Jesus is strenuously opposed to divorce. But let's look at it a bit to see what's really going on here, because this passage can cause a lot of pain amongst people in the church these days, and can be pretty upsetting. And perhaps we can see why it is that the church recognizes divorce and yet remains faithful to Jesus, though he himself expressly

prohibited it, though for highly specific reasons at a particular time in history.

Jesus is asked whether or not divorce is lawful. Now we are told that this was asked to test him, to put him into a trap whereby no matter how he answered he would open himself to criticism. If he said "No", then he could be accused of contradicting the Law as it is found in Deuteronomy 24, and thus he would be condemned. If he said "Yes, divorce is lawful", he would embroil himself in a debate raging among the Pharisees at the time over what constituted grounds for a husband to divorce his wife. One side said that any reason was reason enough—bad cooking for example. The other side said that only adultery was sufficient reason. Jesus would then have to take sides in the debate. To make matters worse, to do so would jeopardize his position with the people. Divorce was entirely in the power of the husband over his wife, and although she was protected financially by law, and the certificate of divorce which he was required to give her in fact gave her her freedom to remarry, the likelihood was slim. Since many of his followers were women, some of whom provided for Jesus out of their own resources, we are told, to be seen involved with the divorce question would make him unpopular at the least.

What Jesus did was to turn the question back on his inquisitors. Don't try to drag me into your fight. Moses told you this because of your hardness of heart. Marriage was meant by God to be a life-long relationship of two people. You who use the divorce laws so liberally may be keeping the letter of the law but are violating its spirit, because in fact you are using the law in order to commit adultery. By unjustly treating women as you do, by divorcing an innocent wife, you force her to commit adultery (Luke 16). And if you divorce and marry another woman, you commit adultery against your first wife.

Jesus is doing something new here. It is the man who bears the guilt in both cases, not the woman. Far from jeopardizing his position, Jesus is striking a blow on behalf of women, defending their rights in a new way, because only women were seen as responsible for both adultery and divorce. It was never the man's fault, oh no. Jesus says, it is a travesty of marriage to treat it in such a cavalier and one-sided fashion. And in support of his argument, Jesus quotes the Genesis passage

that was also read this morning; and I think that what Jesus meant by the statement "Those whom God has joined let no one put asunder" really means: marriage was instituted by God at creation, and even Moses himself does not have the authority to undo it. Deuteronomy 24 does not supersede Genesis 2.

In contrast to the comparative ease of divorce in Jesus' time, the church has always taken a dim view of divorce and remarriage, and at times has talked about the indissolubility of the wedding vows. St. Augustine wrote that people who are married in a pagan wedding (today we would call it a civil ceremony) are not bound one to another and may divorce at will. A Christian married to a non-believer is not ultimately bound to his or her spouse. But Christians who have taken vows in the church are never to divorce or remarry, even should one of the partners die. These vows are forever. But then he was a fine one to talk: his own common law marriage ended when he became a Christian, largely it seems due to the conniving of his mother Monica. Christians, even the great ones, are not immune from the problems of human life.

For the truth is that divorce has touched all our lives in some way. Many of us have experienced the grief and pain firsthand. Many of us are married to persons who have been previously married. Divorce has occurred amongst our children, our brothers and sisters, our parents, our friends. And for those of us who are married, this constant presence of the possibility of marriage breakdown and divorce makes us afraid that we may allow it to affect our present relationships, and can rob us of our confidence in ourselves and in one another.

Some churches, both Protestant and Catholic, are scandalized by divorce, and strip divorced people of their membership, and they end up punishing those whose marriages have failed, especially if they are clergy. So much for healing! The church continues to crucify its wounded.

For other churches, divorce is not the problem, but remarriage is, for they insist that the first vows are now and always will be in effect, usually citing today's Gospel passage as proof. Remarriage would in effect be bigamy, regardless of what the courts have declared about our legal status. Remarriage is only accomplished by somehow finding a legal loophole which will

permit us to say that the first marriage can be said not to have really occurred at all.

Other churches are less rigid than that. Our Anglican Church of Canada has only permitted the remarriage of divorced persons in the past 25 years or so, and still only with the permissions of a Bishop's committee. In England only four years ago, clergy who remarried after a divorce, or who married a divorced woman, were not permitted to minister in the church. Strange positions, are they not, for a church which owes its founding partly to Henry VIII's desire to marry a new wife?

But does the church "do" divorces? Certainly not. The state does divorces. For Christians in the church, marriage is a covenant, not a contract. Marriage vows are made in good faith, and are intended to be for life. We cannot simply undo them and remake them at will, even though the law of the land permits it. So why then does the church permit remarriage of divorced people? Because marriages are organic, they are living, changing things which need attention and care and nurture. They may starve from neglect. Sometimes they get sick, and sometimes they do not get well again, and die. Now this is no excuse for giving up too easily, for prematurely killing off a perfectly good marriage that still has some life in it and could be revived. But for some reason, displaced pride I suspect, people usually don't begin to seek help for an ailing or wounded marriage until the prognosis is terminal.

The church does not do divorces. But it does do funerals. It recognizes death when it sees it, names it for what it is, but then in obedience to the Gospel it proclaims hope for resurrection, that death does not have the final say in human life or in God's love for us. I think that our Anglican approach is amongst the most realistic and the healthiest. We do not pretend that the first marriage never happened, nor do we pretend that divorced people do not exist, or subject them to an inquisition. We simply recognize that if a marriage ends, it is over. There is no use pretending that it is not. The people involved have made that decision, not the church. And people deserve a second chance at life.

So in fact there is now available in the Anglican Church of Canada a liturgy for the ending of a marriage, for those who want to use it. It is most emphatically not a liturgy of

divorce; the church cannot “do” divorces. The couple must already have separated and have finished all the legal matters involved.

The service exists in the *Book of Occasional Services* which has recently been published to accompany the BAS. It is not the only such service around. The liturgies for the ending of a marriage which I have seen, and since they are relatively modern, I have seen only a few, are not happy or superficial things. They do not take marriage or its failure lightly. The Anglican service combines an expression of regret and grief for the relationship now admitted before God to be over, penitence for people’s inability to keep their vows, which were made in good faith, then provides an opportunity for peacemaking between the former partners as individual persons.

Today’s Gospel also includes the passage about Jesus and the little children; and I ask you, if a child of ours made a promise with all the best and honourable intentions of keeping it, but found out later that he or she was not able to do so, do we throw that child out of the family for failing, or punish him or her for life, or forbid them from ever trying again? No, of course not. We listen with sympathy to their apology. As parents we may express disappointment. And for us to offer forgiveness is not the same as indulgence, permissiveness or granting license. Will not God treat us as a father or a mother who loves a child? As Jesus said, if you who are sinful know how to treat your children with love, how much more will your Father in heaven give you?

So to say that the church grants divorces, or that since it allows divorced people to remarry it approves of divorce, is untrue; it would be like saying that since the church does funerals it kills people or approves of death. The church simply admits what is.

My personal feeling is that to force two people to remain together in a relationship that is completely beyond recovery is also a travesty of what God intended marriage to be; it is forcing a dead thing to keep the outward appearance of life when the soul has fled. This is truly ghoulish; it is the stuff of horror movies. My feeling is let us bury our dead, grieve, and then get on with living, and allow for resurrection in the lives of those who have experienced the grief of divorce. If we are to have life in abundance, then allowing people to try again seems

to me the only just and faithful thing to do. A good second marriage can be as Easter to those involved, a discovery that life is indeed good and worth living, despite our risks, losses and failures.

Marriage is not for all people, and we ought not expect everyone to live according to a single pattern of life. Yet somewhere in between casual divorce and legalistic prohibition lies the true meaning of marriage for God's people. In both cases of completely liberal permission for divorce, or in the utter refusal of it, the letter of the law kills, but it is the spirit of the law which gives life to those who choose to be under the law.

Let us strive to find that spirit. Let us, if we are married, find God with our spouses; let all of us look for God in the marriages of others; as the marriage service says, may those who are married live as God's sacrament to a broken world, so that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy overcome despair; may marital love enrich our common life and become a sign to us of God's faithfulness.