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27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

If I were divorced and hearing these words of Jesus at Mass today, I would probably be sitting there thinking, “*wow, I really messed that part of my life up...*”. I might even feel not worthy to be here to share in the “heavenly banquet”. Worse, I might even feel condemned by Jesus. If you are divorced, it may be that you really have, in a sense, messed up your life—or been a victim of someone else messing up your life. But if you feel condemned by Jesus, you are not hearing these words of Jesus in the proper spirit or context. As I hope you realize, Jesus is rarely about condemnation, and most often about forgiveness and new beginnings. And so, this community of faith embraces divorced persons with the love of Jesus as they search for new life.

And so, this is the bigger picture to remember here: all of Jesus’ teachings, miracles, and prayers are focused on one objective-- to bring about the Kingdom of God. Jesus saw the possibility of, and committed his life entirely to, re-establishing God’s wondrous order of creative love. The Kingdom of God which was to come—the Kingdom of God Jesus so often preached about-- was to reflect the original order, the original beauty, and the original justice of God’s creation at the very beginning of time. That original love had been marred over time by original sin. But, in the vision of Jesus, as the Kingdom of God would slowly emerge through the lives of those, like us, who followed his teaching, that original order of creation would gradually be restored.

In the first reading today we heard of that original creation in the Book of Genesis. God created human nature in beauty. God created Adam and Eve, male and female, perfectly complimenting one another. The first man and woman in their relational love reflect the very nature of God. It is an image of divine life through divine unity. It is a very idealistic picture. Notice in the Book of Genesis, that ideal picture turns sour very quickly. It does not take long, once human beings and their free will get involved.

The beauty and order of that first relationship is the Kingdom that Jesus desires, with his whole being, to re-establish. That is why he states the ideal so clearly and so unequivocally. And he winds up dialoguing with the Pharisees about his idea of marriage, and how it fits into his vision of the Kingdom. We can see in this dialogue that divorce was just as commonplace and as much (if

not more) of a tragedy as it is in our society today. Scripture scholars tell us that in the lifetime of Jesus, husbands could divorce their wives for the flimsiest of reasons with no financial settlement of any kind required. Divorce was entirely the prerogative of the husband-- and the wife had no say and no rights.

Jesus clearly challenges this male-dominated society in teaching that men and women are equal in rights and responsibilities. He teaches that committed human love reveals God's love to the world, and that living committed love is one of the building blocks of the Kingdom. That is why he teaches about the importance of faithfulness in marriage, and that neither men nor women are permitted to initiate divorce. Is this too idealistic and unrealistic? Not if understood in the proper context. Jesus is preaching values that were against the culture of his time. The same values are challenging to our culture. If we want to be partners with Jesus in bringing about the Kingdom of God in our time and place, then we also have to strive for these ideals and values with the understanding that we are not perfect, and that sometimes we fail.

It's no accident that Mark's gospel moves from Jesus' discussion of marriage to an incident with children. Jesus again becomes counter-cultural in welcoming the children as unique creatures, formed through a moment of intimacy and the creativity of God. Jesus blesses them and tells those around him that the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. This was quite striking at a time when children, like women, were regarded among those with neither rights nor worth, in a society more male-dominated than our own.

Jesus provides us with a vision of the Kingdom of God. He describes it with many different images, stories and parables, and invites us to spend our lives allowing that Kingdom to be born into the world through us. The problems, pain, and agony of marriage and family life are often a far cry from this ideal image. But because we have the gift of faith, we believe that the Kingdom of God is possible. Because we have the gift of faith, we believe that the sacrament of marriage brings with it the grace to tend and cherish this special garden of marriage and family life. Because we have the gift of faith, we believe that we can turn to the mercy and forgiveness of Jesus, and find wholeness once again, when we fail to live up to the ideals of his Kingdom, as happens in the case of divorce.

I would like to offer some reflections on the imagery generated by the account of the creation of human beings that we heard in the first reading from the Book of Genesis, especially in the context

of the #MeToo movement and the voices of women being heard around the world today. When we hear this reading in the English translation chosen, it seems obvious that the first human was created male, and that the female came later only to be a “suitable partner” to the male. Some biblical scholars, however, suggest a different understanding, once one considers the original language.

The first human was made “from earth”. The Hebrew word for earth is *adama*. Thus, the one created is referred to as *ha-‘adam*—that is, “the one made from earth.” Most English translations render *ha-‘adam* as “man.” But, this gives the wrong impression if “man” is taken to mean strictly “male.” The original “earth creature,” if you will, of Genesis 2 is sexually undifferentiated. There is, as of yet, no such thing as “male and female.”

Only when God makes two out of the one earth-creature do we finally hear the Hebrew words *ish* and *isha*, the words for male and female respectively. And so, only when there are two persons being discussed are traditional gender identifiers used simply to indicate their respective differences. Therefore, it is important to know that, in the original language, it is *not* true that the man was created first and that the creation of woman was simply an afterthought, an entity created only to serve the interpersonal needs of the man. Rather, the two genders presented here spring forth from one divine creative act. Out of one entity, the earth-creature, the original undifferentiated human, two equal persons emerge. And, as the text continues, “*The two become one flesh.*”

As the story progresses, we see the human pair disobey God and sin. And so, they are punished, and their original harmony and equality is lost. Only then does the male begin to dominate and control the female. As the story unfolds, we see that the strife between the genders is the result of their initial disobedience, the result of their human sin. Hence, it is not in God’s original plan for the human family to suffer such. Nevertheless, salvation comes out of God’s unfailing and faithful love for that human family.

God’s own son becomes human, and in his living, dying, and rising... evil, sin, and death are conquered once and for all. The lives of the redeemed-- all of us-- now have a new reality, a new life shared as sisters and brothers in Christ. The original harmony in God’s family is restored, and all are equal as children of God. That’s the vision that unites us here in this sacred space as we celebrate the Eucharist. That’s the vision that is supposed to guide our living each day after we

leave here. And the more people that honor this vision and live this vision around the world, the more things like the #MeToo movement will hopefully not be necessary in the future.