

- A rewarding part of my ministry over the years has been helping couples prepare for marriage. I often begin our first conversation with some rhetorical questions. My goal is to help couples *think about marriage in a deeper and more reflective way*. One question I almost always ask is this: Given what we hear from Genesis in our reading this morning, does this mean that marriage is *naturally* permanent? Think about it: Is marriage *naturally* permanent? I choose these words carefully. Some people respond by saying, "why, yes." *But then*, I point out two difficulties arising from a 'yes' answer. The *first* is a practical one. If marriage *is naturally* permanent, then *why do they come apart*? Given that they do, *isn't it better to recognize our fall from Grace*? So, even if God created marriage as gift that was *meant* to be permanent, *our exile from Eden has altered God's created reality*.
- *Second*, if we believe that marriage is *naturally* permanent, then *why do we have sacramental marriage as a liturgical rite*? For it symbolizes a grace-enabled *transformation*. Acknowledging this about the marriage rite, and recognizing the effects of the Fall, lead us to a further insight. Permanent marriage *may have been* the Creator's *original intention* for us. And so, *we can still* see a reflection of God's purpose *even in* our fallen state. For we yet have an *inclination* to seek *enduring* marital relationships, even if we cannot *—on our own—achieve permanency*. These *three observations*, *first*, about the *Creator's intentions*; *second*, about the *effects of the fall* upon us; and, *third*, about the *sacramental remedy* for our fallen condition; *fit together* to shape our Christian view of marriage. *Recognizing these three components helps us live toward and into God's hopes for us*, in a world *still marked by* our fall from Grace.
- One *further* observation: if we *truly* believe that marriage is *naturally permanent*, then *—to be consistent—* we should *oppose* the legal termination of marriage in divorce. And yet, *if we recognize* that some marriages fail

because of *the fallen condition that we all share*, then we should be more tolerant of legal separation, and the termination of marriage agreements.

- These observations help us *hear and appreciate* our Gospel this morning. The question with which the Pharisees come to test Jesus is significant: "*Is it lawful*," they ask, "*for a man to divorce his wife*?" The Pharisees' question *has layers of meaning*. *The varied circumstances of human life in this world are often more complicated than God's revealed law can completely cover*. So the Pharisees would recognize that *human law, even when it is based on divine law*, often goes *beyond* it.¹ They make this clear when they refer to how Moses granted permission to divorce. And, as we know, *not every aspect of God's revealed law has proved everlasting*. Think, for instance, about dietary laws in light of the Gospel.² And so, *when the Pharisees ask Jesus if divorce is lawful, they are not necessarily asking about the Creator's intentions, nor about God's abiding will for Israel*. And this is why Jesus' response to them is so important. For, in a way, Jesus '*out-lawyers the lawyers*!'
- That is, *Jesus does not accept, nor does he feel bound by, the assumption within their narrow question*. And his way of responding here helps us recognize a central principle within Christian ethics, and Anglican Moral Theology. When someone asks if something is "*allowed*," notice the *limitations* of the question. *Asking if something is legal, or if it is allowed by custom, is different from asking if it is right*. And sometimes, it is little more than asking if I can '*get away with it*.'³ And so, when the Pharisees ask if divorce is '*allowed*,' Jesus steers them back to *the better question*, which is this: *What does God want of you? What choice best reflects God's will, and God's hopes for you?*
- By noticing this, we *do not ignore how sometimes and in some circumstances, it becomes unavoidable to ask, 'is it legal,' and, 'is it allowed.'*

When someone finds him or herself experiencing *ongoing* marital conflict and the *breakdown* of a marriage, he or she probably *has little doubt* about what God *wants* of us. Instead, the question weighing on his or her conscience will more likely be, 'so, *is it allowed?*'

- Notice also the *generic* nature of the Pharisees' question. *It's not that one* of them has come to him, facing a troublesome pastoral situation, and asks *if*, given the circumstances, *it would be ok for him* to divorce. The Pharisees ask about a general human problem, *without* any particular qualifiers. And Jesus' *public* answer *beautifully* responds in the same way.⁴ *If you really want to know what is right*, he is saying to them, *then inquire about God's pattern for Creation; about God's will for us within it; and about God's hopes for us as we live toward the future*. In other words, we should center ourselves as much as possible on what is *always* right. And we should *limit* how much we ask, 'is it *ever* right to do this or that.'
- Both our Genesis reading,⁵ and Jesus' reaffirmation of its teaching, tell us *what is always right*. Once again, I choose my words carefully. I mention what is *always* right, *rather than* what is *only* right. *The rabbis taught for centuries that a man must, or at least should, leave his parents and be joined to his wife for the purpose of becoming 'one flesh.'* Though we hear those words as referring to sex, the rabbis were thinking about the *outcome* of sex ~ that is, the procreation of children. One explanation for this perceived spiritual obligation was *so that the Messiah could be born*. And this helps explain how, in the early Christian community *after* the birth of the Messiah, marriage was no longer seen as an *obligation*. *Celibacy* was seen as an *equally appropriate* way to live as a baptized person, especially in imitation of the Lord. Therefore, *it is always right for baptized men and women to leave their parents and be joined with each other in marriage. And, it is always right for us to remain single.*⁶

- We now live at a time when legal separation and divorce have become culturally-accepted possibilities. As we know, *new and different questions* are being asked about marriage and human sexuality. These questions alert us to *important* and *complicated* aspects of our shared human life. And these are *much bigger matters than we can address* today. But we should notice *this*. *Many of these new questions are being asked in a manner that parallels the Pharisees' question about divorce. Concerning various alternative ways to live and be with one another, people are asking, "It this okay?" "Are we allowed to live in that way?" "And would it be legal?"*
- Since these questions are similar to what the Pharisees asked Jesus, *it is reasonable to suppose that he would respond in a similar way. That is, he might at first respond in a way that seems to avoid the questions as much as answer them!* As with divorce, *Jesus does not* make things easy or simple for us. *Like his approach in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus points to God's purposes and hopes for us, rather than to what is commonly allowed or widely permitted.* "Friends," *he might say: Regarding your questions, remember that, "from the beginning of creation, 'God made {us} 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'."* With these words, he is suggesting the terms for our conversations, rather than simply offering us rules to live by.



James Tissot, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; Adam and Eve Perceive Their Nakedness

Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, “[Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?](#)” He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 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, let no one separate.](#)”

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Notes:

¹ This may explain Jesus’ reference to how Moses “wrote this {*extended*} commandment” for them. See Jesus’ response (in our Gospel reading) to the Pharisees’ observation that “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal...”

² See the report of the deliberations among the Apostles in Acts 15, in light of Paul’s ministry and experience.

³ To explore this point further, see my book, *Ethics After Easter*, and especially chapters 1 and 5

⁴ It is worth observing the difference between Jesus public answer to the Pharisees’ question, and his private response to it with the disciples, later ~ a contrast I am not able to address here.

⁵ See Genesis 2:18-24, in context.

⁶ This is reflected in the additional verses we find in Matthew’s parallel to our passage from Mark 10:2-16, in Matthew 19:10-12.