

SERMON FOR ORDINARY SUNDAY 27B
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In a months' time Natalia and I will celebrate our first wedding anniversary. As I approached this Sunday's Gospel, it made me reflect on the many words that we said to each other on our wedding day almost a year ago. These included promises, vows and declarations. But if you had paid very close attention, you would have noticed that there were a few things that we *didn't* say. One of those was the idea of Natalia being 'given away'. In the traditional marriage liturgy there is a part at the beginning where the presiding priest asks 'who giveth this woman to be married to this man? To which the father would give his daughters hands to the bridegroom in a reflection of giving one over. The new prayer book however got rid of this part and it has now mostly fallen out of use.

Why is this the case we may ask? Well as usually happens our liturgy reflects our thinking, and as we have moved into the modern world, changes

in society brought about changes in the way we thought about each other. One of the major changes was the rights of women. This was seen in the women's suffrage movement which sought to earn equal rights for women before the law. This led to the women rights movement that found full expression in the 1960's. This saw a shift in our understanding of a woman's role in marriage and that is now reflected in our liturgy. And thank goodness for that.

But what of this original idea of 'giving away', where does it come from? Well in our Gospel context today it reflects the Jewish Law, which saw women as the property of the man, so she was firstly the property of her father, but she was then handed over to her husband. And so, if a man wanted to divorce his wife, he could freely do so, but a woman could not divorce her husband.

So today we have Jesus confronting a certain interpretation of the Jewish Law, and in fact going beyond it to the heart of all relationships, found in the creation story of Genesis. In the

Genesis reading we have an image of male and female being created equal, the imagery of them becoming 'one flesh', partners in life. However, because of the hardness of their hearts, we are told that the Jewish interpreters of the law had used the scriptures to their own means, divorce had become another way to ignore the needs of women and children, something Jesus sought to confront.

And Jesus', ever weary of the Pharisee's true intentions for asking such a question, responds using the scriptures, the book of Genesis.

But in usual Gospel of Mark fashion, the writer does not have Jesus expand his teaching to everyone, but only to his group of disciples. For it is only when they return to the house that Jesus expands his teaching and explains what he means. He goes on to explain that divorce is not the ideal because its affects can be detrimental to both parties, but in particular the wife. For with no rights under the law, she had no way of earning money and caring for herself, therefore becoming vulnerable to poverty and shame.

And this became a huge issue for the early church as it moved from a Jewish culture to a Greco-Roman culture. Women had rights under Roman law, though nowhere the standard of our modern world, they were able to divorce, and had a certain sense of autonomy. And so began the struggle between the Jewish world and Roman world, a struggle that still continues today, reflected in the Church's past persecution of Jews at various times and the eventual split of Jewish Christians with their traditions.

Jesus' teaching seeks to offer us a way forward from thinking that seeks to exclude and create inequality, and perhaps offer us hope. And we have seen this happen in our lifetimes, for up to 50 years ago, people who had been divorced could not be ordained or hold certain offices in the church and even be admitted to communion. But as we struggled with the Jesus of the Gospel's we came to realize that time and time again, Jesus in fact sought to reach out to women and children, two parts of society that were often neglected. We see this on many occasions, in

John's Gospel, the woman at the well, someone who was in fact divorced, but Jesus used her to spread the good news in her village. The woman taken in adultery, Jesus confronted the Pharisee's on their interpretation of the law, and set the women free. And finally Mary Magdalen and the women at the tomb, they are the first to see the risen Christ, and the first to become bearers of this good news to Jesus' disciples.

And of course, Children. In today's passage Jesus scolds those who would stop the Children coming to him to be blessed, and encourages people to be more childlike in their approach to God.

For what Jesus seems to say in his actions is that love for people comes first, not the law. Jesus is constantly talking about the struggle of human beings to live together in harmony, at one with each other, in mutual love and affection.

And so we come back to where we started. Jesus expresses that marriage can be the clearest expression of this harmony, mutual love and

affection. Marriage is a reflection of God's constant love for his people. Not a love bound by laws, but by understanding the human condition, by forgiveness, by grace and by self-giving love. But it is not just marriage that is to be the place where God's love is reflected, it is in fact in all our relationships with each other, be it welcoming children in our worship, accepting people as they are, we always need to hold the same openness for change, and the same willingness to show love over law, and always to seek the best in each other.

We know that the many changes that now confront the church can be frightening, and we often look for easy answers from the scriptures, but Jesus doesn't always give us easy answers. For we see time and time again that not even his own disciples understand! But he does offer us a way of seeing the world, beyond rigidity to the ideals of love, for God is love, and so we must love, as he loved us.