

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)

THE GREAT MARRIAGE

Genesis 2:18-24

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Analysis by Bruce K Modahl

18Then the Lord GOD said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." 19So out of the ground the Lord GOD formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. 20The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. 21So the Lord GOD caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.

22And the rib that the Lord GOD had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

23Then the man said,
"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken."

24Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

DIAGNOSIS: Lonely

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *“It is not good for the man to be alone.”*

In the most recent biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Strange Glory*, by Charles Marsh I was struck by how often Bonhoeffer struggled with loneliness. Such struggles occurred not only when in solitary confinement after his arrest, but also when separated for long periods from his family and his best friend Eberhard Bethge. Perhaps we all enjoy taking refuge in our own company at times. However, soon we crave companionship with others. Recent news reports document the terrible effects of solitary confinement on prisoners.

God knew it was not good for the man to be alone because God exists as a community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is present and involved in the creation but God is wholly other. The man needed a companion of his own kind.

God created every living creature out of the same ground from which Adam was created. God paraded them past Adam to see if there was one to be a helper and his partner. Presumably God created the other creatures male and female. Adam therefore knew from observation what was involved in partnering. I may be the only one who finds humor in the story but I cannot help picturing Adam naming the hippo and orangutan and then with an audible “yuck” asking God, “What are you thinking?”

It asks too much of the story to question why God did not create the humans male and female from the beginning. The writer has a larger theological task in mind which we arrive at in 2:24. The man and the woman are not like the rest of the creation. The man and woman cling to one another and they become one flesh, “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *A Clash of Wills*
God's intention is for the man and woman to be one flesh. However, at one time or another all of us who are married contravene God's will by asserting our dominance over our partner. This will to dominate is evident in all our covenanted relationships. Friendships, the workplace, and business arrangements are fraught with it.

For far too long the word "helper" as applied to the woman has been interpreted to confer secondary status. All too often biblical texts such as the gospel reading for this Sunday, Mark 10:2-16, are used to keep mostly women but sometimes men as well in an abusive relationship. If one partner abuses the other physically or verbally I wonder if the marriage is not already broken whether there has been a legal divorce decree or not.

The will to dominate is evident in the notion that marriage is a 50-50 proposition. Fifty percent of the time I get my way and 50% you get your way. The only logic of the two becoming one flesh is that marriage is a 100%-100% commitment.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Not Your Will But Mine Be Done*

Only one time have I heard someone say, "As I was walking down the aisle I was thinking, 'I can always divorce him.'" Other than that one time I have never heard anyone say anything close to, "Divorce is a good thing. Everyone should have one." Rather I have heard stories of broken hearts, tears, anger, self-hatred, damaged children, and struggle. I have heard these stories also from those who stayed married, never addressing the loss of intimacy, showing contempt for and outright hatred for the other.

All of this is evidence of a clash of wills that ends up violating God's intention for our marriages. Divorce and

estrangement are more than the result of a clash between the wills of two parties. Divorce is the result of a clash of our will with God's. In divorce we transgress God's will and stand under God's righteous judgment. We have deformed God's creation and are subject to God's condemnation. God instituted marriage as a blessing. By our willfulness we divorce ourselves from God. We are indeed lonely. The grave is a narrow and lonely chamber.

PROGNOSIS: Lonely No More

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (External Solution) : *"It is not good for the woman or man to be alone."*

God the Father sends his only begotten Son to woo us. He is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He is bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh. He woos us with words and deeds, as recorded in the scriptures, miracles and teachings far better than bouquets of roses. Still we spurn his advances. He woos us from the cross where he takes upon himself the violence and hatred that are products of our willfulness. He does not give up on us even then. He pursues us to the grave. We shall not be lonely there. The hymn "Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart" powerfully proclaims

And in its narrow chamber keep
My body safe in peaceful sleep
Until thy reappearing.
And then from death awaken me,
That these mine eyes with joy may see,
O Son of God, thy glorious face,
My Savior and my fount of grace.

In the creed we confess that Jesus pursues us to the gates of hell to rescue us from the bad company that would keep us in chains. He is the helper beyond all others. The word "helper" is used more often for God than for any human helper, male or female.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Being the Bride of Christ*

It is not by our own assent that we become the bride of Christ. Rather the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel, enlightens us with his gift, sanctifies and keeps us in the faith. And the Holy Spirit places us in a community we call the church. Jesus is no polygamist. Jesus is bridegroom of the church of which we are a part through the waters of baptism. No matter how shallow the water in the font, in those waters we are put to death with Christ and raised with him to be new brothers and sisters in the priesthood we all share in Christ Jesus.

In this marriage we daily renew our vows. The words currently in use in the marriage service are "with all that I am and all that I have." The old words better state the transaction. "I plight [pledge] thee my troth [trust] and with all my worldly goods I do thee endow." This is the happy exchange of which Luther spoke and wrote. By confession we daily return to the baptismal waters to renew our marriage vows to Christ. We give him all our worldly goods, our anger, pride, resentment, jealousies. The list is endless. Jesus can have them. I for one am tired of them. They are killing me. And Jesus hands over to us all his worldly goods, forgiveness, fellowship with God and one another in the church, blessings as enumerated in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in scripture, and the promise that one day we shall be like him with a glorified body.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Forming Community*

"The Power of We" was a multi-session workshop designed for married couples. It was written by David Ludwig. Ludwig made good use of Paul's admonition in Ephesians 5:21 "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." That is the heading under which Paul goes on to deal with the practical matters of husbands and wives, children and parents, masters and slaves. When I have used this text at Confirmation Camp we translate the

last one as employer and employee.

I think this same text can be the heading for forming Christian community. It has practical implications as mundane as singing a hymn I don't like with all the gusto I can manage and depending on my brothers and sisters to sing with the same gusto a hymn I treasure which they do not.

Forming community begins with the promises we made at Confirmation: "to live among God's faithful people, to hear his Word and share in his supper." Then the covenant promises address our apostolic calling, "to proclaim the good new of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, and to strive for justice and peace in all the world." This calling takes the form of work in local food pantries, mission trips, and partnerships with mission efforts around the world.

Luther Seminary professor Gary Simpson advocates yet another way in an essay entitled "God, Civil Society, and Congregations as Public Moral Companions." The essay appears in the book *Testing the Spirits: how theology informs the study of congregations*, edited by Patrick Keifert, also a Luther Seminary prof. Guided in part by this essay a group of lay people in the congregation I most recently served, Grace Lutheran in River Forest, IL, attempts to be a public moral companion for the community in an endeavor called "Faith Perspectives." The goal is to address a different controversial topic in two workshops each year with speakers from various perspectives. Topics addressed to date include lessons from the Great Recession, health care in America, immigration, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and violence against woman and girls. A priority is to create an atmosphere in which those attending can voice differing opinions. So far more than 50% of the 75 to 100 people attending each workshop are from the community. The remainder of the participants are from the congregation. It was not long before

other congregations in the community started similar endeavors. Simpson claims it is one of our vocations to be public moral companions. He writes that in so doing we participate in God's creative work, nurturing and sustaining temporal life in the world (*Testing the Spirits*, p. 87.).