

## **The 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost Proper 22B**

Genesis 2:15 - 3:21  
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12  
Mark 10:2-16

*A sermon delivered by the Reverend Timothy Ervolina at  
St. Martin's in the Field's Episcopal Church,  
Forest Acres, South Carolina on October 4, 2009*

### ***Cardiosclerosis***

Back in Judea, the people are waiting on the miracle man. There will be a great show today. Already they are lining up in long queues, listening to his teaching, waiting for the moment when he invites them forward, to say a little prayer with the lame, the sick, the demon-possessed. Mothers holding babies, hoping that his touch will impart heaven's own grace—to drive away the evil eye, or the fever or whatever devil it was that would put half their children in the ground before they could be bar mitzvahed. The toddlers squirmed, while the older ones ran squealing through the crowds, ignoring their mothers' orders to stop. Pushing through the line came a knot of men, long beards beneath stern faces, their eyes looking above the disgusting sight of women and children fraternizing with men. Their phylacteries gleamed golden in the sunlight.

They came to the front of the crowd, where he sat, talking with his men. They waited for him to acknowledge them. He finally looked their way.

“Well, well, well,” he smiled. “To what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from the bar association?”

Their leader bowed, his forced smile becoming a grimace. “Rabbi, what a delight to have you back in Judea. We're honored, really, to have such an esteemed and powerful teacher in our midst. It was pity about your cousin John. We haven't seen you in these parts since then.”

A shadow crossed his face for a moment. He nodded.

“Well, you know he confronted the King about his—his personal affairs. And you know politicians and their affairs.” The crowd snickered. “But John did bring up the whole subject of divorce in that rather unfortunate incident. You and he were pretty close. So we were wondering what your thought was on that matter. Is divorce legal? Because if not, then John was actually a martyr of the faith. But if so, then maybe he had it coming.”

Jesus took them in. His eyes blazed. He nearly spat out his reply. “What no riddles? Only a simple matter of law? What did Moses command you about it?”

They had him. They would leave and report to Herod that John's cousin was back and stirring up the crowds over his divorce and his rather scandalous marriage to his former sister-in-law. It wouldn't be long before the Nazarene would finally separated from his head.

“Moses told us that we could give a woman a certificate of dismissal and be free of her,” They looked at each other in gleeful agreement. The Bible was on their side. Not to mention a despotic King with a very sharp sword.

The air around him crackled with anger. “Moses only told you that because of your hard-heartedness. That's not what God said. Didn't you ever read that from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' Don't you realize that the Bible says that this is why a man leaves his family and is united to his wife and that they are not two any more, but a single, united whole in God's eyes? So if God is the source of this unity, if God is the One who puts people together in marriage, who are you to cut that union apart?”

The little group of Pharisees was silent. “Gentlemen,” said Jesus, “please excuse me. I have work to do.” The Pharisees slipped away, whispering to each other, and the people crowded in again. Jesus touched them, one by one, power flowing out from him to them.

Back at the house where they were staying, the disciples were in a decidedly bad mood. Not only were they dangerously close to Jerusalem, but Jesus seemed intent on getting the government's goat, and in the process, they could all get killed. He would never overthrow the Empire dead. And this divorce thing? This was not even sensible. Half the people who were following him were divorced and remarried. The Bible said you could divorce your wife. Hadn't the great High Priest Ezra even ordered them to divorce their foreign wives.? This business could wreck everything. Besting the Pharisees at their little games used to be funny, but things were different now. People were on edge enough without rhetoric that bordered on treason.

They waited until he seemed relaxed. “Jesus, back there in the square, what you said about divorce. That was just your little tweak of the religious right, wasn't it? You weren't serious about that, were you?”

Jesus took another sip of wine and closed his eyes for a moment. His whole body sighed. His voice was calm, steady and firm. “Look, if a man divorces his wife and marries another woman, he's committing adultery. Same thing when a woman does it. Tough tilapia for Herod, Herodias or anybody else. That's the way it is.” There would be no argument with him. They chewed in stony silence.

They were not even finished with the meal, when the door of the house flew open and a group of squealing children burst in, followed by their mothers, a noisy gaggle of womanhood and childhood that was enough to make a man lose his appetite.

One of them grabbed a running child by his neck. “Stop it. Get these filthy little urchins out of here. Can't you see we're trying to eat?” The child's mother pulled him away, her face flushed red with anger and shame.

Jesus stood up and held the child to him gently. “Enough,” he said to the disciples. “I’ve had it to here with your foolishness today. These children and these women have come to me for a blessing and I intend to bless them.” He tousled the little boy's hair.

He turned to the women, his back to the pouting disciples. “Bring all your children to me, because they are the ones who own the Kingdom of God.” The children crowded around him pushing each other out of the way, pulling at his cloak, trying to grab his beard. He laughed, for the first time that day.

He turned around to the disciples. “Look at them. Anyone who doesn't receive the blessings like these children do, doesn't even get what the Kingdom is all about.” And he knelt down into a pile of tiny giggling people, hugging them tightly.

If this congregation has the demographics of most, nearly half of the married people here used to be married to someone else. If they were married in the Church the second time, they received an annulment or an episcopal dispensation allowing a blessing on their union. Grace has triumphed over sin in their lives and they are restored and forgiven. That blessing of the Church, that sacramental union the second time around, was received by them as eagerly as children unwrapping a gaily ribboned present. The wideness of God's mercy is a daily reality for them.

Though the blessing of God and His Church may be bestowed on those seeking grace for their second marriage, it does not undo the pain of their divorces. Some of those divorces came about because of infidelity, some because of abuse or addiction, some because the ember of love grew cold from neglect or boredom. Whatever the reason, the promises they once made were no longer kept, no matter how they once were sure that it wouldn't—couldn't—happen to them. No one enters the blessed union of souls with the intent of later tearing it asunder, but still it happens and God's people are not immune.

It is flesh ripped from flesh, bone broken from bone, a large gaping hole over their hearts that never completely heals. They may be resurrected to new lives, with new hope and new love, but they bear in their bodies the marks of the crucifixion of their old life. That is what Jesus is trying to tell his cranky disciples.

Those of us who are divorced can tell you, if we're honest, that it happened because of what Jesus calls "cardiosclerosis," hearts turned hard as stone. I know. I am one of them. The death of a thousand cuts is what separates the two made one. It is never a single slashing thrust of the blade. Gradually, day by day, the pain multiplies and the one become two again, severed without benefit of anesthesia.

Today's story from Genesis is the second of the two stories of Yahweh's creation of the first human beings. In the first story, which is actually the later of the two, humans are the crowning glory of earthly wonder, made on a Friday morning to romp on the new earth in the afternoon and rest with God on the Sabbath day. But the second story is not triumphant at all. It is the story of promise that ends in pain, of hope that ends in heartache. It's the story of divorce.

God has made a lump of mud into a human-shaped mass, lying on the ground. He bends over its mud mouth and blows the wind of life into it, and it stands on its feet, beautiful, naked and full of wonder. *Adamah*, says the Hebrew, dirt. The mud, the earth, come to life. Yahweh brings before Adam the animals, and Adam, watching them go by, names them one by one. Lions, elephants, ravens and racoons. Dogs, pigs and bears. Great blue herons and little field mice. Baboons and rabbits, opossums and giraffes. The whole of the animal kingdom, barking, mewling, bellowing and creeping. There is even one, as smooth as glass, slithering its way through the grass, that disappeared by a tree. But as delightful as they are, none of them are like the man.

So Yahweh has the man lie down and puts him in a deep slumber. He opens up his side and takes out a rib, and shapes it and stretches it and forms it into something very much like the man, only softer, rounder and even more beautiful. And when the man awakes, he discovers the woman at his side, his literal other half, to be his companion forever. But the perfection of their love does not last. Into their lives comes

covetousness and lies, the pain of rejection, the death of true love. A divorce from the One who desired them to live forever in perfect union with each other and with Him.

First, Eve spends an afternoon, with her new friend, a talking reptile, who informs her that she's missing out on the best thing going—only a bite of the fruit she finds herself increasingly infatuated with will make her freer and wiser than she can imagine. She will be just like Yahweh, endowed with the wisdom of the heavenly court. Oh, and it is so delicious, so perfectly sweet and firm and ripe. She can't wait to share it Adam, who, if he had any doubts about it all, swallows them in a gush of juice pulp. Then it hits them, something is wrong, terribly wrong. They slink off into the bushes, hoping that Yahweh will just miss them on his afternoon walk through the garden. They can hear his voice, gentle, calm, earnest, coming along the path, just like it did every day.

“Where are you? I have been looking all over for you.”

Adam had a twig sticking painfully in his thigh. When he moved the branches rustled.” Adam. Come out of there. Why are you hiding?”

Adam crawled out onto the path, blinking in the sunlight. “I was ashamed.”

The wind stirred in reply. “Why? Whatever do you have to be ashamed of?”

Adam, his hands crossed below his waist, “Because I'm naked.”

A cloud passed over, darkening the sun. “Naked? Have you eaten the fruit I warned you not to eat?”

Adam is in tears. “The woman,” he can't even bring himself to say her name, “She gave it to me.”

Eve shrieked in terror, doubled over to cover herself. “I didn't know. The serpent made me eat it.”

The reason that divorce is so painful, is that it destroys relationships that were once so full of hope. Divorce is not two people choosing to live apart from each other, it is one couple broken from the God who yoked them together. It's why Jesus is so uncharacteristically hard in his words. He is not saying that divorce is unforgivable, but that it is unforgettable. You don't get over divorce. You can only get through it. You can start a new life, filled with grace, love and hope. You can forgive and be forgiven, you can heal, you can live in joy and delight. But you cannot uncreate what once was created.

Marriage is a sacramental act that is different from the other sacraments of the Church. In the others, someone—a bishop, priest or deacon—administers communion, or washes with water, or rubs oil onto your head. But in marriage, two people sacramentalize each other, they co-create a new person, made from each other into one. When a marriage ends, it can only end in pain.

So why do we consider today's lesson from Mark a “gospel,” a “good news?” It sounds like horrible news. Because, says the writer to the Hebrews, in spite of our sinfulness, we have the Son, who is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. Because we don't have Moses, making law to accommodate our hardened hearts, we have the One who is the very reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, who sustains all things by his powerful word. When he went to the cross, he took with him every divorce, and every other human act of sin and purified them. And then he sat down, at the right hand of God, and held out his arms to us, to pull us close to his breast, to welcome us, wounded, broken, sliced in two, into the Kingdom, to be one again with God.

That's why we call it the Gospel. That's why we call it the Good News.