

**A sermon preached by the Reverend Deacon Tim Ervolina
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, SC
On October 8, 2006
The 22nd Sunday After Pentecost Year B**

Genesis 2:18-24

Psalm 8

Hebrews 2: 9-18

Mark 10:2-9

It was in a garden, says the storyteller, a garden at the headwaters of the four great rivers of the world. The trees were lush, the afternoon air soft with the smell of new earth. The Garden, says the storyteller, had just recently been a desert, watered only by a mist, sent by God to dance and whirl and pirouette above the barren land. And from the mist sprang forth the Garden. And in that Garden, says the storyteller, sits a man, a very sad man.

He is not sad because he has nothing to eat. It's a Garden after all, its trees pregnant with sweet fruit, its vegetables sprawling across the moist ground. And it teems with all manner of life. The man spends the afternoon naming the creatures around him. "Anteater, beaver, camel, donkey, elephant, firefly." Right before he nods off to sleep, he names one "yak" then adds one last, "zebra." And he sleeps.

And in his sleep he dreams—dreams, not of animals, nor even of God, but of someone like him, someone he can share this place with, someone he can share his fruit with, someone he can laugh with, dance with, hold tightly to his breast as if he could hold nothing more dearly. And when he awakes, a sudden pain in his side, he opens eyes to the most beautiful of all God's creatures, the one like himself. He holds her tightly, just as in his dream, and sings the first love song: "At last, at last, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh." For the man knew that he and the woman were not two, but one, eternally one.

What is it about love that causes us to proclaim that it should last forever? What is it about being called to share this most precious of journeys with another human that sends our hearts to dancing, that makes us forget the pain of past broken relationships, that makes us yearn and pine and ache for the bone of our bone and the flesh of our flesh? It is not the easiness of it, for nearly half of all marriages end, not in the death of one partner, but in the death of love itself.

Those who are not gifted with the charismata of singleness yearn and pine and ache for unity with another soul because, like Adam, alone in the Garden, we are aching to be complete. And completeness for humans is living in relationship. "It is not good," said God, musing on his solitary human creature, "for man to be alone." We are driven, by our nature, to be in community, in relationship. So, like Adam, we look for love in all the wrong places, until finally weary, we sleep—perchance to dream of the perfect mate.

Only most of us, I dare say all of us, have never found the perfect human relationship. Those

called to the vocation of marriage find themselves trying to put two lives into one house, one bank account, one shared future, and we find that it's harder than our dreams told us it would be. There are little things that get us, like the way he wants his eggs, all runny in the center, or the way she sings off key to Barry Manilow. The way he never picks up his underwear in the bathroom, and forgets to take the garbage out. The way she compares him to her father, and never seems to notice the nice things he does. The way he comes in late, too late, smelling of bourbon and cigarettes. The way she turns away after a kiss. And then, one day, the bone is snapped, the flesh is torn, and the dreams fade into sepia-toned sadness. The lawyers called, the treasure divided, the house sold, the pictures thrown away. The Humpty-Dumpty detritus of a broken relationship extends beyond the couple whose vows of love turned out not to be eternal after all. If they have children, the children are broken by it as well. Their parents and their friends are forced to choose sides. And in the Church, the pain of two members no longer in communion causes us all to writhe with their pain.

It's not supposed to be this way. That's what Jesus was saying when the Pharisees, plying their usual game of entrapment, approach Jesus with a test. "Is it legal for a man to divorce his wife?" So Jesus looks them in the eye, "Well, what does the Bible say?" Now the Pharisees knew the answer and Jesus knew they knew. They were not trying to find out what the law said; they were trying to get Jesus to take sides in a moral debate that was raging around them.

The two main rabbinical schools of the day, those of Rabbis Hillel and Shammai, differed stridently on this point of Torah. The school of Rabbi Shammai held that adultery was the only justifiable grounds for divorce. But the school of Hillel was far more permissive, and believed that if a woman no longer pleased her husband, then he could send her away.

And so the Pharisees answer, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her."

One more time, Jesus contradicts the plain words of Scripture. He snorts, "Moses only wrote that because he knew how hard your hearts were. Relationships are not meant to be thrown out on the trash heap. The very fact that you have to ask that question reveals just how broken you are."

There's a whole lot going on in those words of Jesus. As usual, he's contradicting one part of Scripture by quoting another. He's asserting that women are not just property, to be bought from their fathers and cast off when their husbands tire of them. He's saying that just because something's legal doesn't mean it's the way of justice. For the law often perverts justice.

Still, those words make me squirm, and I bet that they make a lot of you squirm as well. This is not the sweet baby Jesus cooing in the manger. This is the real Jesus, looking deep within me and saying, you were created for a better way, a way dedicated to living for others. It's your own internal hardness that breaks your relationships wide open.

I squirm because, even though I stand before you as one ordained, I also stand before you as someone who has failed at a marriage. It doesn't matter that the Church declared me forgiven. It doesn't matter that a Bishop issued permission for me to remarry. Jesus reminds me of my own role in the tragedy of a divorce, reminding me that my own heart was hard, that my divorce

broke not just two hearts, but the fellowship of two people who had been baptized into the unity of the Spirit.

That's why divorce is such a tragedy. We are created to be in relationships with others. Every sin-fueled breaking of those relationships, especially those formed in the unity of water and Spirit, diminishes us all. It's why, when those who are trying to get Jesus to take sides in the modern debate around sexuality, and are ready to divorce their sisters and brothers over it, are missing the whole point of our creation. And mark my words, beloved: if the Anglican Communion is rent by divorce, it is not because there is a legal loophole in Title IV or some other obscure tenet of canon law. It will be because their hearts have become as hard as a cold, grey stone.

Forgiveness is hard. Understanding the pain and hope and failings of the ones we love is hard. Harder than walking away.

Thomas Merton, in his book of essays riffing off a John Donne poem, *No Man is an Island*, wrote: "There is something in the very nature of my freedom that inclines me to love, to do good, to dedicate myself to others. I have an instinct that tells me that I am less free when I am living for myself alone My freedom is not fully free when left to itself. It becomes so when it is brought into the right relation with the freedom of another."

The writer to the Hebrews does not leave us adrift in the wreckage of our hard hearts. Jesus, he writes, is a "merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." Jesus knew the pain of broken relationships, and he gives us the grace of a brand new dance.

In an interview with my favorite writer, Anne Lamott, Linda Buturian asked her what she most wanted to convey to her son Sam about God. "I want to convey that we get to be human," Annie said. "We get to make awful mistakes and fall short of who we hope we're going to turn out to be. That we don't have to be what anybody else tries to get us to be, so they could feel better about who they were. We get to screw up right and left. We get to keep finding our way back home to goodness and kindness and compassion. . . I want him to know that no matter what happens, he's never going to have to walk alone. . . That's what I'm trying to convey to Sam."

Marriage is a school in which we learn about self-giving love and practice the steps required by the dance of mutual submission. The great dancer Rudolf Nureyev once said of his dance partner, the ballerina Margot Fonteyn, that they danced with "one body, one soul." That is the metaphor that Jesus uses for marriage. The dance of one body, one soul, one flesh, one bone, one heart. Like the Garden mist in the creation story, when we are in that relationship, we swirl around each other, creating and forming something new, something we rightly call a sacrament. Now the catechism tells us that a sacrament is an outward expression of an inward and spiritual grace. What looks like bread and wine is really Christ's own body and blood. What looks like a bath is the washing away of our sins. And what looks for all the world like a smiling groom and radiant bride is one flesh, one spirit.

And they are not dancing alone. The priest, after hearing the promises of the couple kneeling on the chancel steps, asks us: "Will you who have witnessed these promises do all in your power to uphold these two persons in their marriage?" Because they are now one new person in our midst, we proclaim, "We will!" And the priest answers "Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder." Thus begins the dance.

Our dance is not just a dance of married people. For among us are those called to a single life, or left by a partner in death or divorce. There are our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, struggling to be faithful to each other, to God and to us, in relationships that the Church merits unworthy of blessing. We are all called to dance with each other, in a never ending dance of one body, one Lord, one baptism. We may step on each other's toes, we may miss the rhythm entirely. But dance we must.