

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena Illinois
October 7, 2012

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.
Texts- Genesis 2, Mark 10: 2-16

Those of you who were here two weeks ago for our Bishop's Visitation will recall Bishop Epting's sermon. He reminded us of the different ways we have of reading and understanding scripture. There is the literal way – that scripture is inerrant, dictated word-for-word by God and reliable in all things, whether it be science or moral teachings.

Then, there is its opposite – scripture rejected as outdated and superstitious, used by primitive people who have no other way to make sense of the universe. I believe that this way is actually just the flip side of the first. It still takes a literal stance – if scripture is not reliable in all things, then, what use is it?

The third way Bp. Epting gave us was that found in our *Book of Common Prayer*. In the catechism where Holy Scripture is the Word of God – the Word of God that inspired human authors who are shaped and formed by their times and their cultures. The Word of God that continues to speak to us today through the scriptures.

I am most grateful to the bishop for his framework is very helpful when we confront today's Gospel text – Jesus' sayings on divorce and remarriage. Few clergy I know are eager to tackle this text in the pulpit. They may be like me, a person who has divorced and remarried and sometimes wonders how we qualify to preside at marriages and counsel couples about to take that step.

Even if they have not experienced this themselves, they know that in the congregation there are few, if any, who have not been touched in some way by divorce. Perhaps it was their own marriage. Perhaps they grew up in what we used to call "broken homes." Or perhaps they have walked this painful path with their children or grandchildren.

There is another complicating factor for some of us. We use this passage in another debate about sexuality. We say something like, "Jesus was clear about divorce but said nothing about same sex relationships. Why, then are our churches so casual about divorce but so divided on the other?"

The net result is that our churches rarely talk about divorce. So, when this text is read, it lands like a hippopotamus in the chancel. We can't just walk around it and not notice.

So, how do we unravel this text. Bishop Epting says we are to STUDY. How did it come to be written? What was its historical context – what was going on in the lives of the community that might shape its meaning for us. Then, we are to read the Bible in community – in worship and in smaller groups, ask it hard questions "wrestle with the

Word of God like Jacob wrestled with the angel," until it gives us a blessing. A formidable task, it seems to me. How do we do that faithfully in this time and place without relativizing it, trying to make it into something that we prefer, that is comfortable to us? Sort of like Thomas Jefferson's Bible where he went through and cut out all of the passages he didn't like and ended up with a book full of holes.

We do have another tool within Anglicanism beside the BCP catechism. And I hope those who attended the Inquirers' sessions can tell me what that is. All the way back in Elizabeth I's time, when she was working to end the bloodshed and find that "via media," that middle way between Roman Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation, Richard Hooker defined what he called the "three-legged stool" of revelation. One leg, of course, was scripture. But it was accompanied by tradition—like the historic creeds and doctrines of the church; and reason—the use of our God-given minds. The Roman Catholic Church leaned toward tradition as the most important way of revelation. The Magisterium, the scholars, interpreted and taught the people. The people did not figure things out for themselves. The Reformers did a 180. For them, it was "sola scriptura," scripture only. These days, most mainline Protestants are more like Anglicanism with a broader understanding, more legs on their stools, but the more radical protestants still look at scripture only, in a literal sense.

If we read Jesus words to the crowd and especially to the disciples, if we read them at the level of scripture only, they are tough words. And fairly clear. We can see how they impacted the traditions and practices in the church. Think of the words, "What God has joined together let no one put asunder." They are still part of the marriage liturgy. And it is no wonder that the church put rules into place that forbade remarriage and denied the sacraments to those who divorced. It is no wonder that the job of clergy—until relatively recently—was to encourage couples to stay in bad relationships, no matter what the situation was.

Let us study some more. What do we know from biblical scholars and historians? We know that this was another story where the Pharisees, the religious officials, were trying to trap Jesus. They already knew the answer to their question. They knew the law of Moses—that divorce was legal. We know that divorce was a reality—and that it was patriarchal. For many, only the man could divorce the wife. And, there were two Jewish schools of thought on the reasons—for one, the only reason was adultery. For the other, anything that displeased the man could provide the reason. Burning his toast. No longer being attractive to him. And we know that there was no place in that society for a divorced woman. No safety net. We also know that marriage was a legal and economic arrangement between families. And the woman was property that passed from the father to the husband.

So, what did Jesus do? Well, he once again turned things upside down. He says the legality of divorce in the law of Moses was just because the people were hard-hearted. Not because of what God intended for the people. He appealed to a greater law—that of God's creation. That of God's Kingdom, or what I like to call, God's dream for humanity. Here marriage is

not legalistic but a relationship – with God and with one another. In the perfect world that God desires for us, there is wholeness, mutual respect and concern for one another.

Even in the hardest part of this passage, where Jesus talks to the disciples about remarriage as adultery, he makes a radical reversal. Here, the husband commits adultery against the wife – not against her father and the family. And the wife does the same. Here there is no longer a double standard.

In shifting from legalities to relationships, Jesus moves from contract to covenant. That does not minimize the importance of marriage for Jesus. In fact, it raises the bar.

We recognize how different marriage is in our time. Our expectations are very different. It is not so much an economic arrangement now as it is a hope for mutual fulfillment. Our life spans are longer. Marriage is not necessarily for the procreation of children – something that was very necessary in biblical times. We have couples who are unable to have children for biological reasons or because they marry after the childbearing time is over. We have couples who are the same gender. We have couples who do not feel called to be parents.

Of course, it is not enough to say that such differences mean that we can just ignore this passage. Divorce is tragic and painful in any case. What God dreams for us is just as important now as anytime in the history of our world. That should be the starting point and the framework for our intimate relationships.

We may lament the divorce rate now, the greater tolerance in most of our churches. We may say that this is because of the focus on individualism, on the permissiveness of our society. And those things are true, but perhaps there is a blessing in here, too.

We are coming, at last, to a higher regard for women and children. It is not perfect, of course. We have a heightened awareness of the damage that is done in abusive relationships and know that there are times that a marriage needs to end for the wellbeing of all involved. The job for the church, then, is to acknowledge brokenness, not to punish, but to help in the healing, to walk along beside those who are suffering, and to create the kind of community that can support those who are wounded and vulnerable. It is not to make the same mistake of the Pharisees, looking legalistically rather than relationally. It is the same kind of support given when there is physical brokenness, mental brokenness, or brokenness in finances and employment.

Some churches have created liturgies to recognize the end of a marriage – not to encourage divorce, but to help people reorder their lives in positive ways by acknowledging their own responsibility in the ending, by affirming what was – and is – good in the relationship, and by making promises of goodwill and continuing concern for the other's wellbeing.

The Episcopal Church certainly takes marriage – and the end of a marriage – very seriously. At the very beginning of the preparation for marriage, the couple must sign a declaration that says that they understand and affirm marriage (or civil union) as a lifelong union

which in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for mutual joy, and for help and comfort in prosperity and adversity. They understand it as a physical and spiritual union entered by mutual consent within the community of faith. This forms the basis for the premarital or pre-union sessions.

Remarriage after divorce requires the bishop's judgment and rather extensive work with the priest. The process recognizes the termination of the former marriage but does not affect the legitimacy of any children born to the marriage or the civil validity of the previous marriage. There is special emphasis on looking at the dynamics of the brokenness and assessment of the possibilities within a new relationship.

It is a comprehensive process that when done well is sensitive not legalistic or punitive. It hopefully builds relational strengths before the marriage. It emphasizes not the wedding event but the marriage. And that is a blessing. Does it reduce subsequent divorce? I don't know that there are statistics on that.

A marriage is a communal state. When I preside, in the homily I always charge the guests, not just the couple. I tell them they are not just spectators at a special event in a couple's life. They are participants there to witness but also to uphold and support the marriage in the days and weeks and years ahead. And that is the job of the church community, too.

Amen and amen.